

A NOVEL WRITING STUDY OF THE EFFECTS
OF THE HYPERCRITICAL ATTITUDE

by

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PREFACE

The choice of theme in this study stems directly from the author's reading an article, "Your master key to Relaxation," in Coronet, July, 1948.

Dr. David H. Fink, co-author of the article and psychiatrist for the Veterans Administration and for the Superior Court of California, had studied more than 10,000 personal case histories in his investigation of the dynamics of relaxation. Case histories were divided into two groups. Group no. 1 consisted of records of patients who were suffering from mental and emotional tensions. Group no. 2 comprised the case records of people who were free from such difficulties.

After many months of research the findings showed that the group who suffered from extreme tensions had one trait in common. They were hypercritical--extreme faultfinders. And in the other group not a single individual possessed this characteristic.

Investigations were then made with chronic tension cases so stubborn that they failed to yield even to psycho-analysis. The conclusion was reached that faultfinding can be a kind of disease that results in serious mental and physical complications.

The hypercriticism of the two main characters of this study develops into negativism, from which they may be cured only by professional attention.

PROLOGUE

LEAVENWORTH COUNTY, KANSAS

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I

Young James McKenna fastened his four-buckle overshoes and unbent his long body to look for the ducks. The young ones had been out all night and had set up an awful racket several times. Papa had already complained about how much they ate and the racket they made, and James knew he was going to have to get rid of them. From the corner of his eye he caught a glimpse of a coyote slipping into the weeds by the roadside. In the breaking light he began to make out the splotchy white ducks on the north bank of the creek. If they wouldn't run off, and if they wouldn't eat so much and make so much racket...

He went down the three steps and stopped to yawn and stretch. Ordinarily he didn't get up until six, although Papa called him at five. (Mamma was up an hour early, too.) This morning he had remembered that the Parhams and Uncle Joel were coming tonight. He didn't have to be called a second time. He yawned again and took in a great breath of fresh air, forgetting for a moment the impending trouble concerning the ducks as he became overwhelmed by a sense of infinite space and of expanding spheres of ether, and by a sense of his own potential power. He would look at the engine in B. J. Parham's Ford, and he would talk to Uncle Joel about the Haynes. They'd be surprised that he knew so much about gasoline engines.

He crossed the yard splashing and slopping through puddles as he made his way around the henhouse to the corn crib where he kept eleven hens and the drake.

It was going to be hot--steamy hot with all this rain. B. J. probably wouldn't drive his new Ford for fear of getting stuck in the gumbo. And Uncle Joel would probably have to drive his roadster instead of the Haynes. Aunt Louise didn't like to ride in that "little old jumpy Ford"--it would be better if she didn't come anyway. James's moment of exhilaration passed and a feeling of futility weighed. Mamma hadn't been able to be decent to Louise since she had taken to calling Uncle Joel "Brother" in that insinuating tone. Paps was Aunt Louise's brother, too, but he was a farmer, not a doctor.

The Barhams would be sure to ask James what he wanted to be, now that he was almost a man. Whenever Mamma was present, he said he didn't know, because Mamma always said she was prying that James would become a medical missionary like his Uncle Joshua.

James ducked his head to enter the corn crib and, in doing so, became conscious of his bulk and strength. He was a giant for thirteen; his new long pants had been long overdue. He had been too old-looking and too big for knee pants for more than a year; even then Mamma cried when he put on the long pants.

Foolish ducks bobbed about him while he counted eggs

scattered around on the hard ground. Eleven. And, as always, the green one. He looked piercingly at each duck trying to surprise one of them into showing some sign of her genius. He picked up the green egg. It was still warm. He turned it over in his hand, weighing it and pondering its creation. Each morning the same thoughts formed and swirled. Which duck? Why green? Its producer ate the same food as the others--or did she? Maybe she had a liking for green worms of a certain kind... Mamma said God made the egg green and that it was sinful to try to explain it in any other way. It was dangerous to ask how or why.

The Barhams and Uncle Joel were coming! Each time the thought occurred to him he got a new thrill with an edge of fear. As he splashed back through the puddles to take the eggs into the house, he was imagining his answer to B. J. (in Mamma's absence): "I don't want to go to high school. I want to stay home and raise Indian Runner ducks and make enough money to buy that International two-cylinder Titan that pulls three 14-inch ploughs."

"Oh," B. J. would say, "so you want to be a farmer?"

"No, I want to be a mechanic. I could get all of Papa's ploughing done in a hurry with that Titan, and then I could plough for other people and make enough money to go to mechanical school."

Then Papa would slap his leg and laugh uproariously and say that he'd better not count on those Indian Runners

to do all that for him; those ducks were eating them out of houses and home, and no one wanted to eat the ducks or the eggs. And then Mamma would throw her hands up in the air and exclaim and lament that that was all the thanks a mother earned for her sacrifices! "To think that I have worked my fingers to the bone and stayed on my feet when I thought I was going to drop dead in my tracks--when I felt as if I were walking on jelly..." Where would it end?

Kate McKenna stood tall and handsome before the kitchen cabinet stirring cake batter which must prove to be the most feathery of all white cakes. She was known for the unsurpassed excellence of her white cakes. Tears trickled down her face, and she stopped now and then to wipe them away with a corner of her apron.

Cousin Emma, fat and ineffectual, stood at the kitchen table washing breakfast dishes. She, too, was crying. At the front of the house there was noise of furniture being moved. Kate's sister, Eunice, was putting new paper on the dining room; it was not the pattern Kate wanted. Eunice was anxious to help, as usual, but all the time it was a plot to humiliate her sister. Kate saw through all their plots against her. Eunice wanted to marry Matthew. She had made eyes at him the very day he and Kate were married, and she had been hoping ever since for Kate's death.

And Matthew was trying to turn the children against her.

They didn't mind her at all any more. Mark hadn't taken a physic for dear-only-knows how long, and last week Elizabeth had epewed out the pepsin and continued to refuse it until Matthew teased her into taking it. They were all against her. Kate fell to moaning and sobbing, and half-witted mama snuffled in sympathy.

* * *

James opened the kitchen door only far enough to set the can of eggs inside. He took two twelve-quart milk pails from the porch wall and started toward the barn. He hated cows. They were created for man's punishment. They had a terrible smell and could do the worst kind of things to you. He was always getting squeezed between two of them--they were so all-fired heavy and clumsy. And then he was always getting eplattered with urine and stepping into a fresh pie. And the flies were worst of all.

As he entered the barn he choked at the smell of animals and the steam from them mixed with odor of fresh dung. He walked along as close as he could to the barn wall to keep his distance from meesy rumps and filthy switching tails. At least two more years of this and maybe even four, if they made him go to high school. He sat down with his head against a hot, smelly flank and began the monotonous ping, pang, ping, pang.

The Parhams and Uncle Joel... Mama shouldn't be try-

ing to show off, asking town people to supper. Dinner, Mamma wanted them to say. But Papa was right--farmers have dinner at noon. If Aunt Louie wanted to call it dinner, let her. She was stuck up because she lived in town with "my brother, Doctor McKenna."

He began to think about Anna--Anna and himself together. She told him in dozens of subtle ways that she admired him physically and thought he was the smartest person she knew. He had asked Mamma if they could take Anna to church with them, but Mamma had set her foot down. And at that point in James's thinking, Old Polly put her foot down--a cloven hoof--firmly in the middle of James's instep. He kicked her in the belly three times with his free foot before she moved. It felt as if she took all the hide with her.

When he was able to forget the foot, his thoughts turned back to Anna. Anna Spiegel's folks were unbelievers. James was not to have dealings with such people. He hadn't exactly had dealings with her, although he hadn't been able to keep from thinking about it. (Of course, Mamma didn't mean that.) And, thinking was as bad as doing. As a man thinketh in his heart, so is he. Mamma couldn't stop him from thinking. As far as that went, he couldn't stop himself from thinking--and feeling. Anna was fourteen, rosy and buxom. She had masses of rich brown hair that curled and drifted about her face. James thought about her most of the day and before he went to sleep at night--when he wasn't thinking about two-cylinder Titane.

Almost as bad as the Spiegela's unbelief (they didn't go to church) was their German blood. The neighbors had been auspicious of them during the war and now that the war was over, everyone on Cedar Creek held the Spiegela responsible for the death of Henry Corey, killed in France. James didn't see how they could be blamed but he didn't dare say how he felt. Mamma had written a poem about "brave Henry Corey" and had mentioned the "foul Hun." She meant all Germans were foul Huns. The poem had been published in the paper and Mamma had been congratulated by the Covenanter ladies.

James flinched at the slap of old Polly's tail across his neck. If the Barhams failed to mention her composition, Mamma would quote a line or two casually to illustrate something, and then the poem would have to be discussed. B. J. Barham would congratulate Mamma loudly, with a polite murmur of assent from Mrs. Barham. If Aunt Louise came, she would be noticeably quiet, and Uncle Joel would glance at her uneasily. To please him, Louise would praise Mamma--grudgingly. Of course, Aunt Louise loved Papa--he was her youngest brother, but he had Mamma (without whom, in Louise's opinion, he would be better off), and Papa had his children, while Joel had no one but Louise (without whom, in Mamma's opinion, Joel would fare much better).

Matthew McKenna walked past James with a bucket of milk. He should have been surprised to see his son in the barn an hour earlier than usual. James understood that Papa was not

happy about the "doin's" tonight. Matthew was satisfied to be a farmer, and perhaps Kate would have been more content as a farmer's wife if Matthew's two brothers had not been professional men. Uncle Joel had cared for Kate during the births of her seven children and he had cared for the children always. Kate trusted him without reserve, but sorrowed for his soul. She feared medical school had made an atheist of him. She came to that judgment from the light remarks which escaped him now and then when religious matters were being discussed.

Barham and Uncle Joel... James was milking his fourth cow, the last one. He would wear his long pants and the plaid tie Uncle Joel had given him for Christmas. People said he looked like Uncle Joel. Both had black hair and brown eyes; both were tall and long-limbed, had melancholy faces and well-shaped hands. Of course, Mamma had black hair and brown eyes, too, but James preferred to think he resembled Uncle Joel.

At eight o'clock Kate went to the dining room. She stood in the doorway holding the corner of her gingham apron to her nose. Eunice had two strips of paper on the wall. She had deliberately chosen a pattern in the worst possible taste. It couldn't have been uglier. She knew Kate would have to look at those brown vines on the dark yellow background for at least a year.

"I don't know how I can stand it," Kats moaned.

"They didn't have any blue or green, except some ugly patterns," Eunice had said. "This yellow was much the prettiest. Just wait until the Barhams see it and ask them. Just see if they don't think it's pretty."

"I know what you're doing," Kats said now. "I understand all about it. But you'll find out--just mark my word. People are going to know about this..."

When Kate went to the kitchen and asked about the children, Emma looked frightened. "I d-d-don't know," she wheezed.

Both women were thinking of Elizabeth, two and a half years old. Martha was in a high chair in a corner of the kitchen, and they had long before given up keeping track of Mark and Tom. The boys stayed out of the house from daylight until dark except for meals. Emma scurried off to look for Elizabeth and found her sitting on the floor in the front bedroom playing in a drawer of pins and buttons.

"You're a bad girl, 'Lizabeth; your mamma don't know where to find you."

"No, no, no." Elizabeth fought Emma and finally bit her wrist.

"I'm gonna tell your mamma an' she'll spank you good." Elizabeth squalled and kicked all the way to the kitchen. Matthew opened the door from the back porch.

"Here, what the Sam Patch is goin' on?" Emma's explanation of Elizabeth's naughtiness was drowned out by Kats,

who, upon hearing Matthew's approach, had set up a moaning which could not be ignored. Matthew lost a shade of color. He had expected this, but it was always worse than the premonition.

"What's all the fuss about?" He addressed Emma and she had enough wit to know he was asking about Kate and not Elizabeth.

"It's the wallpaper," Emma hissed.

"Wallpaper?" Matthew looked puzzled.

"Eunice uz paperin' the dinin' room."

"What's the matter with that?"

"Kate don't like the paper." All the while Kate was moaning, but Matthew knew she was listening. He started for the dining room.

"Eunice hasa got to get out of thia house," Kate suddenly shouted and Matthew turned about in the doorway.

"You think I don't know what you're plotting against me " she continued, with a mixture of belligerence and injury. "I know all right, all right. Just mark it down in your little book. This will all come out and then we'll see who..." Her words were lost in a fresh fit of sobbing and moaning. Matthew pushed his straw hat to the back of his head and stood with his legs apart and his arms folded.

"Well, I don't know what to do. I'm at my wit's end." Emma's tears began again. She sat down at the stone churn and splatting of paddle in cream was the only sound for a

few moments. Then Baby Martha began to whimper, and Matthew picked her up from the high chair. He trotted her on his knee and sang, "...the tree in the wood and the wood in the ground and the green grass growin' all around and around." While Matthew and the child laughed, Emma forgot her woes and smiled, but Kate left the room doubled up with weeping.

"Emma, hadn't we better call this party off tonight?" Matthew said.

"I don't know if Kate..." She was frightened again.

"Well, I'll ask her." He went past the dining room and looked in. The paper didn't look so bad to him and he'd have thought Kate would be glad to have someone do the work. Sometimes he thought Eunice did things to plague Kate, but none of the acts seemed important to him. The Lord meant people to be happy. In the summer when he and the children were not closed indoors, he could be happy in spite of Kate.

He went to the front bedroom where Emma and Eunice slept. Kate was there waiting for him. She was prostrate (one of her favorite words) on the bed and didn't move when he entered. "Don't you think we'd better call off this de-in's tonight?" Matthew said. Kate didn't open her eyes, but murmured something weakly. "I didn't hear you," Matthew said.

"I said if you'd get Eunice out of this house I could get along very well."

"Well, you know I didn't invite her here and I ain't gonna ask her to leave." Kate rose to a sitting position quickly and gave Matthew a dark look.

"I didn't invite her. You're not fooling me one whit. I know what's going on. No, sir, you're not pulling the wool over my eyes." Kate always stressed her pronouns. She lay down again as if completely exhausted. Collapse was the word. Eunice had purposely brought her to a state of collapse.

"Well, Emma can't manage the children and supper..."

"Dinner!"

"It ain't dinner yet and I don't see how it's gonna be, with all this bawlin' around here. It don't look smart to me to be puttin' paper on the wall the day you're askin' people to supper." Kate rose again, angry and determined.

"I'll show you what I can do and what I can't," she said threateningly, all signs of exhaustion gone. She stepped briskly out of the room, head high. Matthew sighed and left the house by the parlor door, which he had not used a dozen times during the four years they had lived on the place.

* * *

Old Belle switched James in the face with her tail just as he was getting up. That coarse, foul hair smacking across his nose and mouth never failed to shock and repel and anger him, although he seldom finished a milking session with-

out experiencing it. Matthew shouted the cow's name when it happened to him, but there was never a word of profanity uttered in the McKenna's barn. James would have expected a bolt of fire from Heaven to consume him if he cursed a cow. They said Old Man Spiegel swore at his cows till he was blue in the face and beat them with the milk stool or anything else that was handy. But James had never known Anna Spiegel to lose her temper in the four years that she had attended Sunflower school.

As he turned the cows out of the barn, he looked north across the creek at thirty acres of check-rowed corn waving lazily in the morning breeze. They had lost so much of the wheat at harvest time because of the rain that if the corn didn't come through, Papa would have to borrow money to keep the family through the winter. And wheat at \$2.62 a bushel! The binder had clogged up constantly and the bundles had come out in wads. And yet Papa had never stopped whistling.

James winced at the pain in his foot. Mama had brought the Lord into it---sin, punishment, vanity, trials and tribulations of Christians; yet she hadn't hesitated to buy a \$75.00 jacket suit with pussy-willow silk lining. He wished he could have had the \$75.00 to apply on a Titan.

He felt a sinking in his stomach when he noticed that the Indian Runners had disappeared from the north bank of the creek. If they had run off again, Papa would make him get rid of them one way or another right away. Once he and

Papa had found the ducks five miles from home.

Matthew had carried his can of milk to the house. There was left only the milk from the last two cows. Walking to the house with a pail in either hand, James thought about Anna again, forgetting his injured foot and the ducks. He wished he were old enough to marry her. If he were old enough, Mamma couldn't stop him. He could explain the plan of salvation to Anna, and she would be converted. He couldn't believe the Lord would refuse to save Anna's soul. That would be carrying foreordination too far.

He looked across the road southeast beyond Cedar Creek Dam to the point where he could sometimes see smoke rising from Spiegel's chimney. Finally he saw a wisp curl up into the light June air, before his own white clapboard house shut off the view. Tonight there would be Uncle Joel and B.J. Barham, and between now and that time there was Mamma.

Eunice put the last roll of paper on the wall with satisfaction. The Barhams wouldn't dare say what they thought of the pattern, but Kate's dear sister-in-law would. There would be lies galore told by the good Covenanters, but Louise McKenna wouldn't tell them. Louise thoroughly enjoyed enforcing the hidebound doctrine of the Covenanters. Kate had gone over to that congregation after her marriage. Eunice, her mother, and her younger sister, were still members of the

United Presbyterian Church in Cherokee County.

How would the question of wallpaper be brought up? Eunice couldn't very well begin the discussion. Would Kate have the gall to come right out and tell them without any preliminaries that Eunice had chosen the paper? She might. You never could tell what Kate might do.

When Matthew came to the doorway, she didn't turn around, for she was afraid he would read guilt in her face.

Eunice was too tired after papering to help with children or cooking. She lay down for a nap satisfied that the evening would bring a taste of revenge for the praise and material rewards which Kate had received from her mother and never earned.

II

The guests had gone home. Emma was struggling with attacks of dizziness. Her fat face was gray and drooping. Kate said she had no more strength left and went to bed, asking Matthew to see how the children slept.

Matthew looked in at the boys. James moved slightly under the sheet to show that he was awake. Mark and Tom had none of their older brother's modesty. The sheet hung off one corner of the bed and their slender legs sprawled at odd angles. Their nainsook underwear was crumpled and twisted and their heads were soaked with sweat.

Mark was crosswise of the bed, one foot aimed at Tom's stomach. Matthew straightened Mark and his underclothes and pushed back the damp hair on his forehead. Matthew felt very tender toward this child that gave more trouble than any of the others. Tom was Kate's baby. His grandmother had spoiled him, too. Maybe that was what put the Old Nick into Mark.

Matthew turned reluctantly toward the room where he and Kate and the girls slept. Kate lay limp in her white muslin gown, her hair in two long shining braids tied at the ends with hair which she had combed out. The sheet covered her to the waist; her thin hands lay outside. Her face was drawn, with dark areas around her eyes.

Scarcely realizing his thoughts, Matthew prayed: If it be possible, let this cup pass from me. He crossed over to the bed where Elizabeth and Martha slept. There were three

chairs along the side of the bed to keep the children from rolling off and pillows under the bottom sheet to make a steep grade along the edge--a kind of dyke. Kate couldn't bear to use the old cradle in which Beatrice had lain those last months. Even yet, two and a half years afterward, whenever he went into the cellar and saw the cradle hanging on the rafters, he became weak at the knees and sick at the stomach.

Martha was chubby and rosy now, but in the winter she had screamed and clawed with colic. Elizabeth hadn't been eating well since warm weather had set in. Joel said she was bilious; she should have fresh fruit and vegetables. Emma didn't take much stock in that suggestion; she thought Elizabeth should be given castor oil. Kate had given little attention of any kind to the children since Beatrice's death.

Matthew was the only one who could persuade Elizabeth to chew up the little pink tablets Joel had left. Matthew was the one who walked the floor at night with Martha when she had colic. Then he got up before five o'clock, summer and winter, to do chores and work in the barnyard or the field. He had even prepared meals--boiled potatoes, fried eggs and bacon--at noon and again at suppertime after working all day. Emma was barely able to direct her efforts sufficiently to keep the dishes washed, the house in any semblance of order, to do laundry and churning.

As Matthew sat down on the bed, Kate moaned. He felt the futility of trying to sleep. He couldn't go downstairs. Kate

would accuse him of dealings with Eunice. He couldn't even sleep with James. It was Kate's privilege to leave him in bed alone, but he had no such right concerning her. There was no way out. Thy will be done.

He took off his good suit and put it on a hanger behind the faded bedspread which hung from a shelf six feet from the floor. The air was still and heavy. He wiped the sweat from his face with the tail of his nightshirt before putting it on.

Kate bore Matthew's presence and his silence for several minutes. Then she sat up in bed and, with her eyes closed, began rhythmically kneading her intestines, her elbows drawn forward. She had developed gas on the "stomach" and it would be pressing on her heart in a half-hour's time. Nobody sympathized with her suffering. No one knew what she suffered. Not even Matthew. He had health and a good appetite.

All those people had gorged themselves and she had known that the little she did eat would lie like a rock on her stomach. She kneaded more vigorously and was able to bring up a few belches. There it was. No one could know what she suffered. They didn't care. Eunice was trying to kill her. Ah, but people were going to have their eyes opened!

She had said tonight at the table that it was strange that two persons could grow up in the same family and have such different tastes. She had told them that, for instance, she never would have chosen the pattern of wallpaper that was now on the dining room wall. Eunice had smirked and

glanced about at them and, with her usual braaa, had said, "Well, let's just see now who is right."

Everyone but Louise had been uncomfortable. James had lowered his head and looked at his plate. Matthew had laughed and pretended it was all a big joke. Now B. J. Barham had more feeling for his wife than to treat her with such disrespect.

Kate was seeing them as they had appeared a few hours earlier...Joel's face beautiful in sympathy. The sorrow in his features she did not understand. He could not have suffered as she had, for he went about his duties in good health. Maybe his liver was bad and he was keeping the fact a secret. He was rather sallow.

And sitting beside Joel, where she placed herself, in spite of Kate's seating suggestions, Louise looked angry and disgusted. (She had ridden in the roadster for the second time since Joel had bought the Haynes a year ago.) She had not hesitated to say that the wallpaper was nauseating. Kate tried the word mentally as Louise had pronounced it--the "a" a heavy "zh." Tomorrow she must look up the word in the dictionary to see if Louise's pronunciation were correct. Had she, Kate, been pronouncing it incorrectly? If that proved to be true, she would be mortified. She tried to remember a time when she had used the word in Louise's presence.

Kate had been kneading her insides for several minutes, and the gas was coming up in great long-drawn explosions. Why didn't Matthew do something for her? He could at least

show some sympathy. He'd finally come to understand the sinfulness of lust. In the early years of their marriage he had allowed his passions to rule him.

Kate had recognized the shame and sin of the animal act the first time. It was a punishment the Lord had put on man because of the sin of Adam and Eve. The Lord commanded his chosen ones to replenish the earth, but because of Adam's sin, He gave man lust and commanded him to subdue it, and He gave woman the agonies of childbirth. The mother had so much the greater suffering...

But now, thank the Lord, that was all over. Joel had agreed that Kate had fulfilled her duties of reproduction in bearing seven children. She had five of them left to bring up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. Joel had said she and Matthew had fulfilled... Joel just didn't comprehend the sufferings and sacrifices of a mother.

Matthew stirred and turned toward her on one elbow. "Do you want a hot water bottle?" Kate frowned and went on kneading without answering or opening her eyes. He wanted to go downstairs. She knew what they were doing. Eunice and her ruffled nightgown... Eunice going to the kitchen for a drink of water when Matthew went downstairs to warm the baby's bottle (no more bottles)... Matthew in his nightshirt...

Matthew snored. So he was going to sleep through her suffering. Well, we would just see about that. She had been

forgetting to bring up the gas for several minutes. Ah, how it was pressing on her heart now. And what fearful blasts she was producing. She had learned how to time vomiting action with massaging to bring about amazing results. She ought to write Suzanna Cockcroft to tell her about this marvelous method. Three long belches, and, as Matthew stirred, Kate began to moan. Elizabeth stirred, began to fret and finally cried out. Then Baby Martha awakened and set up a wail.

Kate suddenly became quiet, listening. Someone was going downstairs. Eunice! She had been waiting in the hall--or, the slut! with James... Kate leaped out of bed and ran into the hall. Matthew rose and shouted above the children's crying, "What the Sam Hill?"

"Eunice," Kate screamed.

"What's the matter with her?" Matthew had feared the house was on fire. He couldn't make out Kate's answer. How could she know about Eunice downstairs? Had Eunice yelled? He dragged himself across the room to the children, took both of them in his arms, held them close, patted them, and sang "Old Dan Tucker." He heard Tom in the next room soothing Mark.

"It ain't nothin'. Mama's just havin' a fit."

Matthew listened for James. He was the one who usually quieted Mark. He couldn't be asleep, because he was the most easily disturbed of any of the children. After several min-

utes, Matthew left the children sleeping and went into the boys' room. Mark and Tom were asleep. James's bed was empty. Matthew's throat tightened suddenly. He went down the dark stairs, feeling his way with his right hand on the wall. Before he opened the door at the foot of the stairs, he heard thrilling voices in the dining room. As he walked through the kitchen, Eunice said, "You'll have to answer on Judgment Day for selling me a liar."

Matthew stepped into the light of the kerosene lamp. "What's goin' on here?" Everyone was silent as he looked from one to the other. James was lying on his stomach on the old leather couch, head turned to the wall. Kate's gingham apron covered him from neck to knees. The hem of her nightgown was serving to catch the tears. Emma drew back out of sight into the bedroom as Matthew entered. Eunice, the symbol of righteous wrath, stood beside the table.

James got up suddenly from the couch, exposed for an instant in his nainsook underwear, long legs startlingly white. Kate snatched at the apron to cover him, but he pulled it away and said, as he strode out of the room, "I'm going to sleep in the barn tonight." Kate burst into loud weeping.

"Kate accuses me of being upstairs tonight--in bed with James," Eunice said, plainly enjoying the excitement. "James said..." She stopped, showing uneasiness as Kate stood up.

"I didn't say any such a thing."

"Well, I'd like to know what you did say. Just ask Emma." Eunice looked at Matthew. "James said he came downstairs because he couldn't sleep with all that..."

Kate stopped crying and with jaws set, stared steadily at Eunice. "You get out of this house. Get out of this house or I'll...I'll..." She stood up and moved toward Eunice, who ran into the bedroom and looked the door.

Matthew awoke before dawn. He had to talk to Joel. Something must be done. Kate had decided to spend the night on the couch in the dining room to make sure that Eunice didn't leave her room. Would the daylight bring worse troubles? Eunice would go back to Cherokee County, but then there would be something else.

He went downstairs as quietly as possible and looked into the dining room. Kate was sound asleep on the couch with a quilt over her and with the lamp flickering dimly on the table. Emma would be afraid to come out of the bedroom; no doubt, he would have to get breakfast if he wanted to eat before eight o'clock.

On the back porch, he put on crusty milking overalls over the cleaner ones and went to the barn. The ground had dried somewhat and the day was going to be clear and calm. Matthew felt his spirits rise. He began to recite to himself from

the psalms:

The lines are fallen unto me in pleasant places;
Yea, I have a goodly heritage.
Weeping may endure for a night, but joy
Cometh in the morning.
Fly upon the wings of the wind.

Matthew had a good bass voice. He began to sing "Old
Hundred from the Covenanter Psalter:

All people that on earth do dwell
Sing to the Lord with cheerful voice.
Him serve with mirth; his praise forth tell.
Come ye before him and rejoice.

He had learned ninety-two of the Psalms when he was a child. Of course, he had never sung any other religious music. Eunice made fun of the Covenanters because they used no musical instrument and because they sang Psalms. Matthew had little admiration for Kate's sister, but he tried to get along with everyone. It was disgusting to have Kate accusing him of dealings with Eunice. He did have dreams about her, but he couldn't do anything about that. When a man has a healthy woman around the house and sleeps with a sick one...

The freshness and beauty of the dawning day was weaving amnesty, and Matt said in his heart: They that sow in tears shall reap in joy.

As he went into the barn, James was climbing down from the loft with hay in his hair.

III

Joel's roadster eputtered and backfired as he started for the farm. He had spent the day before in Kansas City talking to three "nerve" doctors. He had nothing encouraging, or even definite, to tell Matthew. He had promised to examine Kate, but he expected to find no changes since his examination in February. Matthew said it looked to him "like the Old Nick was in her--she didn't try to keep hold of hereelf."

Joel hunched over the wheel, his bulk straining the capacity of the little car. He remembered the June day two and a half years ago when he had slipped out of church before the end of service. He had refused to go to the cemetery to hear Kate's moaning and see terror in little Tom's face, the frantic demand for negation in James's.

And Matthew. What had it been for Matthew? Kate gained a certain satisfaction from suffering. In Beatrice's death Kate saw proof of her own persecution, her sacrifices. But Matthew wept inside of himself where no one could see and in the night when no one heard.

That day a fragment had kept turning, grinding in Joel's mind..."a purpose in God's ways." That was what the preacher said. The phrase had come back nagging, taunting, rasping during the months that followed. What purpose in giving grief to a mother who is losing her sanity and dragging her family down with her? Cleansing by fire, says the minister. Then

Matthew was to be cleansed--Matthew McKenna, who had never questioned the wisdom of his Creator. He loved his children and the earth that he turned...the Lord only knew how he could love his wife. He was kind to his animals and tolerant toward his fellowmen. And he was to be tortured, even more than with death, by incessant moaning and by misery on the faces of the living--in his house a sickness which could not be healed. Cleansing by fire, deep unquenchable fire...

Joel's car followed the ruts of the narrow road which ran through timber to the farm. The Spiegel farm was just ahead...that nonsense about their being spies...Kate's poem--doggerel. Poor Kate...such pressure for social superiority, intellectual superiority, perfection. Never satisfied. Move and keep moving. That was what they had decided. There were cases that showed...not cure, only temporary relief with each change. Sell the farm, Matt. Throw away your soul, Matt. Parcel out the children. Louise wants Elizabeth. Would Kate's younger sister take the baby? And the devil take you, Joel. You're supposed to be smart; can't you figure out any other way?

The roadster rattled onto the viaduct (Matt and the children said "viadock"), and Joel glanced downward to the tracks twenty feet below. He had found Tom and Mark there in the spring watching the freight cars carry a batch of unwanted kittens out of sight. Both were crying. Papa was going to

kill the cats; James had told them if they could get rid of the crittera some other way--for keeps--Papa wouldn't have to kill them.

Joel had always resented this wooden structure as defilement of nature, but now it occurred to him that it was of more use to mankind than he, Joel McKenne, M.D. A dozen people, one time an entire family, had been mangled, cut to bits by heavy wheels of locomotives before the viaduct was built. A crude arch, a soulless monotrocity was able to save lives, but a doctor--with a brain to study his cases and prescribe remedies--was able to save only the lives that fate grudgingly granted. Dirty, chugging engines could be stopped. He had not been able to stop that malignant growing thing in Beatrice. He had watched the thin blade cut away two-thirds of the liver ...it had not been enough.

Beatrice was dead. She felt no more pain; it was the living that must be looked to. But the mind would not obey. He could not drive through these woods without thinking of Beatrice. He saw her walking in quiet shades, listening with her whole body. At the flash of a redbird she stopped on her toes with arms spread out, eyes wide. Her hair was fairy gold spun from sunlight. He wished he could remember her always that way instead of the wreith--the haunting, heartbreaking little ghost.

These woods brought other memories. As children, Joel, Matt, and Louise had played under the groined vaults of the thick-spreading trees. Joshua was older; somehow, Joel doubted

that Joshua had ever played. For seven Octobers, while Joel was studying medicine, he had been homesick for the stillness of the hollows, and the water singing on stony creekbeds beneath the wooden bridges. Then he had come back home to practice medicine.

The roadster was thrown into a frenzy of sidewise hops as the wheels struck the sides of the ruts. There in front of him was the farm--the farm where he had been born--and Matt and Louise and all of Matt's children. James McKenna had homesteaded the place. There had been too much sternness and solemnity in that house. No whistling on the Sabbath. Maybe that was the reason Matt had whistled so much on other days, and, since their father's death, on the Sabbath, too. But for all that, no one ever hinted that Matt was a lesser man than his father. Matt's children were not forbidden to whistle on the Sabbath, but they were always at Sabbath School and knew their catechism and the Psalms before any of the other Covenanters children.

As he turned into the drive, Joel looked at the white clapboard house as if he had never seen it before. It was nothing but a thin decaying shell. There were better shells than this in the world. He couldn't tell Matt that. Sell the farm. If it's the only place you've ever known, you'll soon know others, many others. Don't expect to settle down, not with Kats. There might come a time...but who could even

think about that?

Joel clattered into the barnyard and drew up to the back door. Elizabeth was standing at the window, her dark hair stringy, jelly around her mouth. The ducks started a racket when Joel slammed the door of his roadster and the black shepherd came racing and barking from behind the barn. After him came Tom and Mark barefooted and shirtless. Kate must have stayed in bed today; she wouldn't have allowed the boys to run around in that condition. They needed haircuts. Joel ran his hands over their heads. "Tell your papa to cut your hair when he gets time."

"He ain't never got time," Tom said.

"You'd better watch your grammar or you won't get into the second grade this year."

"Aw," Tom scoffed, "I already finished the second grade. I'll be in the third."

"Oh. Well, I guess I lost track somewhere."

"Yeah, I guess you did," Mark said solemnly. "Who yuh gonna look at?"

"Oh, Mamma, course," Tom said.

"She's in bed. That's why we got our shirts off." Mark grinned toothlessly. Tom looked at his younger brother disapprovingly and, a few minutes later, nudged him when he began to confide further confidential matter.

Joel rattled the change in his pocket and watched their

eyes grow huge as he selected a quarter for each of them. They were used to nickels.

Kate had gotten out of bed. She was in her usual place at the black stove with her feet in the oven. Emma was sitting in the corner churning, the sweat running off her face; she giggled and blushed when Joel came in. Baby Martha was in the high chair playing with beads. Elizabeth had left the kitchen. She was timid as a wild rabbit, mostly, Joel felt, because no one had time for her. Emma kept her fairly clean, but there was no one to play with her.

Joel sat down beside Kate and placed his bag on the floor. "How are you feeling these days?" He opened his watch and began to take her pulse. Her hands were thin and brown-spotted. She was limp this morning.

"My liver has been acting up. I can't digest anything but milk." She kept her face supported with one hand. "I feel sure I have a malignant growth."

"Where do you think...?"

"In my liver."

"Do you have pain?"

"Oh, yes. I'm never long without pain."

"Would you like for me to examine you?"

"I don't think you could tell."

"As thin as you are, I couldn't miss feeling a growth."

Kate was pleased at his mentioning her thinness and agreed to an examination. They went into the dining room, where Kate stretched out on the leather couch, and Joel probed the abdominal region thoroughly. Kate seemed to be satisfied. However, as they went back to the kitchen, she asked him if he would speak to Matt about the dangers of meat in the diet. Joel looked puzzled. "I don't know anything about such dangers," he said.

"There's an article in a magazine..."

"I wouldn't put any trust in such articles. There's been no suggestion in medical circles..."

Kate interrupted. "I know well enough what caused Beatrice's death. It was meat all right. No one can tell me..."

Joel picked up his bag and then set it down again, remembering the little girls. He went in search of them.

Emma had lifted Martha out of the high chair, and she had crawled off to another part of the house. He found her in the dining room tearing the front off the Country Gentleman. He picked her up for a moment and played with her and then went across to open softly the door into the bedroom. Elizabeth was standing by the window at the far side looking out. Joel did not go in. He squatted in the doorway and brought two sticks of candy from his coat pocket. She watched him, but would not come.

"I want to see how big you are," Joel said. "I don't think I can pick you up now--you're getting so big." He hadn't been to the farm for almost four months. Could she have forgotten him? How long would it take to tame her if she went to town to live with him and Louise? He would have to find some time himself to play with her. Louise didn't think children were human. Apparently she couldn't remember her own childhood.

After a few minutes he coaxed Elizabeth to him and gave her the candy. He didn't try to force her to be friendly. Then he went out to find Matthew.

This was the part he dreaded. His spirit revived somewhat when he heard the happy shouts of the boys. They could not be suffering greatly. Boye could get away from the house.

He had timed his call right. Matthew was coming in to dinner walking the bay through the shallow creek bed north of the alfalfa land. He had left the cultivator in the field. Joel waited near the granary. Matthew stopped beside him, took off the bridle and threw them over the fence. The horses were streaked with sweat.

"This heat's sure hard on horses," Matt said. He was gaunt and sunburned. When he pushed back his straw hat, his forehead above the sweatband line showed dead white. He smacked the horses' fat rumps to send them off to the water

tank.

"Hard on men, too," Joel said.

James came around the corner of the corn crib with a hoe on his shoulder. He looked questioningly at Joel, said hello self-consciously and followed the horses to the tank. There was enough water for midday, but James knew he was not expected to hear the pending conversation, and so he began working the pump.

Joel waited inside the half-open barn door while Matt filled the feed boxes. Then the two men squatted on their haunches farmer-wise with their backs against a manger. First Matthew and then Joel picked up straw to chew.

"I examined Kate."

"Yeah?"

"Same as ever." After a few moments Joel took a deep breath. "Talked to some specialists in Kansas City."

"Yeah?"

"Only one thing to do--sell the farm, get ready to spend several years on the move."

"Is that gonna help? Ain't that gonna be too much excitement?"

"Well, Matt, just think when her health is beat. It's always when something new is coming up that takes her mind off herself. She was stronger during the six months that Beatrice lay dying..." Ah, he had thought that dozens of

times. It was the first time he had voiced it. He looked at his brother. Ashen paleness had crept in under red-weathered skin. "Matt, if there were anything I could do..."

"I know there ain't nothin', Joo."

"There's something else. I know that from what Kate has said you're not living as man and wife. It's her idea of sin, I suppose?" Matt nodded, bit off a piece of straw and spat it out.

"You don't believe it's sinful, do you?"

"No, I don't. I don't go around thinkin' about it in the daytime, but at night...I guess it ain't no worse for me than you."

Joel didn't answer for a moment. The two of them chewed their straws.

"Matt, I don't know what I believe any more..." Joel paused and both men kept their eyes on the ground..."but I couldn't keep a peaceful mind and body if I didn't... have a woman." The silence was painful. "I know. Then why don't I marry? I can't tell you exactly."

Matt squirmed with embarrassment. He wished Joel hadn't told him. He had wondered, but had never allowed himself to speculate too far.

Now Joel realized his brother hadn't wanted to hear all this. "I suppose you pray for me, Matt?" Joel's voice was very grave. Matt nodded. "Don't ever stop," Joel said, as

he got up. Now he, instead of Matt, was pale. He started for his car and, halfway there, turned to call, "Stop in at the office Saturday." Matt lifted a hand in assent.

The tall figure folded itself into the roadster. To Matt, the face behind the windshield looked old, strange.

Joel, looking back, saw Matt as flesh of his own flesh-- but flesh with a faith and steadfastness that he himself had never had. How did one get such faith? Was foreordination the answer? Matt believed in foreordination, predestination. Then why pray? The Bible, as God's word, commands it. And Joel had asked Matt to pray for him. Why? It was no use... pure superstition. You couldn't change things. Fate. Foreordination. But no, that made existence worse than futile, made it a torture, an insult...

LONG BEACH, CALIFORNIA

1940

II.

Elizabeth McKenna walked slowly looking at the numbers above doorways and then down at her slip of paper. When she found the place, she hesitated for a time before going into the building. Inside she considered waiting the fifteen minutes until her appointment time in the lobby. George was probably swamped with patients and she didn't like to talk to strangers anyway... But there were traveling men and a couple of sailors here... She finally sat down on a bench and picked up a newspaper that had been used for wrapping. The sailors were eyeing her...if this war got going, that is, if the United States got into it, sailors would be finding their conquests less difficult---when in port. Women would feel the necessity of helping the poor boys, and who could say... Elizabeth sighed. If one judged everything that came to his attention...

This newspaper, three days old, was the first she had approached in more than a week. 1940 born in wild revelry... crowds make merry in Times Square...churches offer prayers for war-torn world... Presidents of national exchanges in New York City hopeful for New Year... Hull voices hope for peace... Secretary of Labor Perkins optimistic about 1940. Favorable factors seen...home industry likely to break records...Likely. No doubt about it, if we got into the war.

Steel output highest...cotton consumption largeat...

The Cancelleria, monument of Renaissance Rome, burns...
forty-four granite columna... Vasari frescoes... Old Vasari, sensational and unreliable, objected to obscenity of Michelangelo's figures in the Last Judgment...despicable old Vasari. Why the derogatory "old?" A habit from childhood: Old Pearl, the lame horse; Old Lady Bartlett, whose own children were scoundrels and who tried to advise other people about their children; old hen, old sow...

Appointment time was nearing. Elizabeth went to the elevator.

There were three persons in George's waiting room,-- one man and two women past middle age, all expensively dressed. Long Beach was full of wealthy, retired people. George probably experienced no trouble with his clients "beating" their bills as his father had.

One of the women was striking. Middle fifties; hair frankly gray, waved softly; black eyebrows shaped slightly; strong face--no self-pity, no fullness under the chin; rather large mouth painted lightly; pierced ears, small diamond-set earrings, no other jewelry, except a diamond dinner ring; black gabardine suit, plain, elegantly-cut; black pumps; gun-metal stockings, the sheerest. Married? No, couldn't be. Too much self-respect, poise. Ever been miserable? Right down stinking miserable? Yes...but nothing could make her so now. She sat with hips against the back of the chair,

her neck a firm column for her head.

Elizabeth compared herself with the woman. Her own clothes less expensive, more casual. No hat, but by the time she was gray, that is, if she should be wealthy enough to buy expensive hats... Her mind wandered considering the possibilities of wealth. Hats, pocketbooks, jewelry--one could sacrifice them for a good suit. Her gray twill had cost \$35 against, perhaps, \$75 for the black gabardine on the subject across the way. She felt the pricking of dissatisfaction as she compared stockings. Her own were not sheer enough.

The nurse called the man, a frail old creature, very refined and delicate looking. The woman that Elizabeth had been studying continued to look out the window while the other woman watched the man leave. The elegant one had thoughts which made her sufficient unto herself.

The nurse would call her soon now, Miss McKenna. Would she say to George the things she had considered, or would their meeting bring out something she had not anticipated? She must not make him feel that he was obliged to advise her. She must keep her independence and dignity. Her clothes were unobtrusive, her speech superior, she thought. If he didn't betray pity... Perhaps she shouldn't confide in him at all. If it turned out wrong, she would feel depressed.

The man came out and the nurse called, "Mrs. Pig," and

couldn't refrain from smiling. Elizabeth had expected to be called next. The woman in black turned her head from the window and arose gracefully. Mrs. Fig. Surely not p-i-g. She was, or had been, married, and to a man with that name. Before the door closed into the office sounds of effusive greetings and easy laughter came forth. They were on familiar terms. The needle of jealousy pricked. How ailly. George had known hundreds of women since she had last seen him. He could even have married two or three times. If it had been a man instead of Mrs. Fig... She remembered now...she had known a man by the name of Figue. He had pronounced it "peeg." That didn't help a great deal though, for Papa had always called, "peeg, peeg, peeg" when he slopped the hogs.

If it had been a man who was on familiar terms with George ... Yea (with relief), she would still have been jealous. She didn't like to feel that sex was of overwhelming importance.

Mrs. Fig was staying a long time. She was a woman of experience and intelligence. Of great intelligence? Now Elizabeth suffered a sharp twinge and she did not like herself for it--being jealous of intelligence. People were born with intelligence or without it. And perhaps the results of the tests were not of great importance. Wasn't it possible that some of the most brilliant might refuse to take the

tests seriously--refuse to go through their paces?

By the time her name was called, Elizabeth had wandered mentally into a number of blind alleys. One could still see sky above the alley, and one could scale the wall to look beyond, but it wouldn't be worthwhile. She had climbed to the top of a few.

Mrs. Pig came out of the office looking solemn. What could George have told her to put that look in her eyes? They had laughed together at first. Elizabeth felt suddenly stronger because of the pain she had seen. There was nothing any more that she could be told to make her look like that.

When she walked into George's office, it was much easier than she had expected. She hadn't seen him for almost ten years and he had made the most of his time; yet he was human--fallible.

He looked up from behind thick lenses. She had almost forgotten the effect of the glasses.

"Elizabeth!"

"Hello." She sounded shy. He got up and they shook hands rather stiffly.

"I didn't have any way of knowing whether it was you..." she sat in the chair beside his desk. The office was elegant like the woman in black. "Do you live around here?"

"No, here on business."

"How did you know I was here? Something in the home paper?"

"Yes."

"It's been a long time. Let's see...almost ten years, isn't it?"

"Has much happened in ten years?"

He considered. "I don't know. Medical school... That's about all."

"Married?"

"No. You? I mean, what have you been doing?"

"Enough has happened, but not enough of importance."

"You haven't married?"

"No."

He laughed and said apologetically, "You can't tell by names these days. Women go by their maiden names... How are the rest of the family?"

"All married--apparently happy."

"Will your business keep you here long?"

"I've been here for six months--near Huntington Beach. My mother is with me."

"Oh." She could see the change in George. "How is your mother?"

"About the same as she was--ten years ago. Perhaps worse."

"Your father...?"

"Is dead." He knew enough not to say he was sorry.

But she was here to tell him, not to wait for him to ask

questions. In her mind she prefaced her next words with his name. "(George), I've brought my mother..." (Someone had asked her one time why she said "my mother" instead of "Mother.") "...to live for a year. That's the length of time necessary to establish residence in California."

"Yes...?"

"She has spent some time in public and private institutions in the Middle West. We can't bring ourselves to put her into another one. She complains of cruelties--almost nothing which affects her directly, but she suffers from watching mistreatment of other patients."

"And you think the institutions in this state...are more humane?"

"I've been told so." Was George feeling pity? He must not. She made a special effort to sound objective. "We can't afford a private sanitarium. Our one attempt in that direction was not successful anyway. There is the matter of climate, too. She's cold all through the year. She could be out-of-doors more here. And then..." Could she get through this?

George was looking at her expectantly. She glanced about the cold, colorless office--oyster gray, impersonal, calming--trying to detach her mind from what she was about to say and fasten it on something, anything.

"We have decided that...she must be confined...with no question of another parole. If we are near her, one of us

will take her out again and...that is, if she knows one of us is near..."

"And it begins all over."

"Yes."

"Do you know anybody here?"

"My brother, James--you don't know him--lives down south, not far from San Bernadino, and I have a cousin..."

"You're going to stay?"

"I've thought I'd like to live in California... I'm going to stay the year and as much longer as is necessary to...take care of the business. Then if I stay longer, my letters to her will have to be postmarked in another state."

George was scowling, his thick lenses giving him an owlsh appearance.

"Have you considered the possibility that your mother will reach a climax before the end of the year? Has she ever been violent?"

"I've considered the possibility. She's never attacked anyone--except once. She knocked her sister's glasses off. I know her thoroughly. If I can stand anything...if I can be a consistent hypocrite, I think I can avoid serious trouble."

"She is not at present on parole from an institution?"

"No."

"Dad was on the medical board at Edgerton when...?"

"Yes."

"If I remember correctly, he used the term manic-depressive..."

"Yes...with increasingly long periods of depression."

"Cigarette?"

"Thanks. I didn't come to unburden all this on you..."

"That's all right."

"I came for advice concerning myself." She could feel him studying her face. It wasn't a bad face--eyebrows slightly heavy for the fashion, nose a bit bony, jaws too prominent, perhaps; but, all together, not bad. She wondered fleetingly why George hadn't married. He had been seen a good deal with a Radcliffe girl while he was in college.

"This year is going to be difficult...already has been," she continued. "I'm not sure I can get through it... Do you think a psychiatrist could help me?"

"Possibly..."

"Psychiatrists' fees are high."

"Yes." George was silent for a moment. "I might be able to help you. I've been interested in psychology... studied psychiatry, in fact... If you could be frank with me..."

"Yes, I think so..."

"There's something else...how is your mother physically?"

"She can do anything she wants to do. Her heart is strong. She does nothing to wear it out."

George considered for a moment. "As for the attention you need..." He looked at his watch. "...I have one more appointment...if you could wait ten or fifteen minutes, we could go out and have a cocktail..."

"It would be my first." Elizabeth smiled. "I couldn't anyway. She...my mother's in the car."

"Isn't that risky?"

"No, I don't think so."

"You can't know her that well."

"There's nothing else to do. She won't stay in the house without me, and thank God, she won't get out of the car!"

"Why won't she?"

"She's afraid I'd lead her into a doctor's office."

"Afraid of doctors."

"Mortally. I could tell you of an instance, but I should be getting back."

George was drumming lightly on his desk studying her... seemed to be criticizing... She couldn't remember that he was a critical person. She hadn't really known him. They had been mere children, fifteen and eighteen. She had liked his big loose-jointed body, his easy manner. The easy manner had come from his being the only son of the only town doctor

--prestige galore. She had been in love with him--not an over whelming passion, but a wholsome one she thought. George's father had probably asked him to stop seeing her.

"...if you'd feel perfectly free to say anything at all to me..." he was saying.

Elizabeth sighed. "I think I can speak freely, because I don't think I can be hurt any more--as long as I don't fall in love, and recently I've noticed that I frighten men away before they become seriously interested."

"Wow! --if you'll excuse the expression. You do need treatment!" She smiled and shrugged. George took off his glasses to wipe them. His eyes looked weak, ineffectual. She pitied him for an instant. As she watched him replace the glasses, there came the memory of his hands on her face...

"I must go." She rose.

"One thing--you are obliged to let me know what happens if you don't come back for advice."

Elizabeth smiled. "Oh, I'll come."

"Master of your fate and all that?"

"Hardly. I'm not a fool."

"We'll go into that later. I mean fate." Both of them laughed. "When can you come?"

"I don't know. May I make an appointment with your nurse?" He nodded. "I hope you can help me avoid blind alleys in my

thinking."

"I'm not a philosopher."

"Just so you don't tell me to stop thinking."

The nurse got up quickly when he opened the door into the outer office.

"I have one more appointment?"

"Yes."

His manner had become impersonal. "In a few days then?"

She nodded and walked across the thick gray carpet, aware of her near-perfect posture--chin in, flat stomach, hips tight, legs swinging from the hips.

In the street she absorbed the soft air, the mild warmth of sun. She had thought the climate would help her to get through...the restful green of lush vegetation--palms, pepper trees, but she had come to take it for granted. Chicago was the only city she knew. She remembered it as a torture chamber of dirt, shrieks, and pressure of bodies. Here were open sky, clean buildings, space, yet one couldn't be eternally grateful...

She had told Kate she was going to look for a job in Long Beach. She'd have to be careful...describe an interview or two--not in detail. Kate would sense the effort to convince.

And after today? How would she manage seeing George? Perhaps she would pretend to take work she could do at home--

reviewing books. Kate knew nothing about such matters. There would have to be a checking up with an editor once a week...

She could see the scarred fender of the black sedan in the middle of the block. If Kate were not there...if she had become suspicious and decided to take refuge with strangers... She would start doing those things any time now. Six months to go.

Kate had been hiding for the last three years like a mole in the dark earth. She was depending on that scrap of paper to save her. They had all signed it. They would not have her, or allow her to be, placed in an institution for the insane, private or public, knowing that God would send any one of them to Hell who had a part in such a move. It was Kate's wording. There had been several such papers during the last twenty years.

Elizabeth glanced into the back seat at the mound of blankets. She was it that. It was in there.

When she opened the driver's door the lump stirred and the eyes showed for a moment; then they disappeared into the folds of the blanket. Only the nose protruded from the mass. Patrick greeted her with violent wagging of his curly, black body and tried to climb into her lap.

Elizabeth drove out into the sparse traffic and made her way to the coast highway. Along the side of the road

were gorgeous red geranium hedges; in the Middle West one had to pamper geraniums to get a few stingy blooms. Oil wells bristling everywhere marred the beauty. Oil was wealth --one couldn't avoid all ugliness. It could be done if people were willing to try. She expected too much, Mark said. Let it go. Take the world as it is. Enjoy life. She didn't even have the power to wish that she could stop criticizing. She would no longer have motivation if she didn't care how anything looked or how things were done. Her caring was the drive. If she could only keep somewhere within the extremes. She would be someone other than Elizabeth McKenna if she could.

She passed the turn she was to have made and had to get back to it. She felt Kate rise up and look to see where they were. Kate would be afraid for a moment, afraid she was being betrayed, in spite of the scrap of paper. One betrayal. The one and only betrayal--for life. It was Kate or the rest of them. It had to be Kate. There was no hope for her. There might be some for them.

A sudden wave of futility settled on her like a grey veil. Why was she doing all this? The torture of a year... Why not let it go? No, Mark hadn't meant that to apply to Kate. They were all chicken-hearted. Something had to be done. Elizabeth was the logical one. The others had gone the limit. Six months...

Elizabeth stopped at a roadside market for a box of oranges. She bought lemons and oranges in large quantities; they made up almost half of Kate's diet--milk the other half. Kate rose on one elbow, squinting at the light. When she identified the market, she drew back again into her mound. Patrick jumped down and raced about wildly, ears sailing in the breeze.

After spending most of her life in the Midwest, Elizabeth was reveling in fresh fruits and vegetables in January, in wide choice and low prices. One needn't struggle for mere existence here. She bought one small eggplant to stuff (its sleek purple hide was irresistible), a bunch of pencil-slim carrots to be eaten raw, and three small yellow squash to be steamed. She would arrange the vegetables in a bowl to enjoy their beauty before cooking them. The supply could be replenished easily, for the market was within walking distance of the ranch.

As she turned the car into the unkempt yard, Elizabeth was aware of an unwelcome attachment to the ranch. She had made up her mind never to become involved with people or places again. It was too painful tearing free. She found herself projecting her consciousness into the future to find out whether she would win or lose, trying to imagine what the coming one hundred eighty days might bring...certainly untold boredom, with suppressed impatience and revolting hypocrisy. Kate had to be pampered, but not too much; she must be deceived--with care.

One slip would mean failure.

She opened the car door for Kate and, walking slowly beside her, carried the two woolen patchwork comforters into the house. Although Elizabeth was warm in a suit and light coat, Kate shivered inside numerous sweaters and a fleece coat. Her woolen stockings were twisted and wrinkled at the ankles. Her thin, almost emaciated body was bent and drooping, appeared weak. Adrenalin could change that body into a steel spring or molten metal...unmanageable, untouchable.

Mother and daughter mounted gingerly the rotting steps to the back porch. The house hadn't been lived in for several years, except for occasional short periods that Cousin Midge had spent here to escape the murderous summer heat of the Imperial Valley. She had accumulated a fortune in the valley, but she expected to come back to the ranch to live. (Elizabeth was accustomed to ranches which covered a couple of counties; this one consisted of fifty-five acres.)

Upon arrival, six months earlier, Elizabeth had been shocked by the condition of the interior walls. Paper was peeling off and plaster breaking loose in every room. The kitchen walls were smoked and grease-spattered.

"Don't you think we should have new paper?" Elizabeth had asked. Kate was rocking gently in the old chair she had initiated upon bringing, drinking milk with her eyes closed. She never ate at the table any more.

She answered without opening her eyes. "It doesn't matter to me. I have only a few more days to live."

Elizabeth knew better than to argue the point. It was then she had begun her terrible hypocrisy. She could not say "the Lord" as Kate did; she would have been suspect immediately. There was too much familiarity in that form of address. She said, "God may grant you a few more years so that you may show your children how a Christian is able to bear up under suffering." She was surprised at her own glibness and she could see that Kate was pleased. The picture of herself as a martyr to the salvation of children was one which Kate had worked at unceasingly.

Elizabeth had not used the unctuous tone. Her voice had been matter-of-fact; yet she had managed to sound sincere. The ring of sincerity had been possible because of the deadly seriousness of purpose in the back of her mind.

After stripping the loose paper from the walls, Elizabeth had tried to get Kate to suggest colors and patterns. It was useless. No one was to spend money in Kate's behalf, except for the food that went into her mouth. When the Lord called her home, she didn't care what was done with her body. She could be put in an unpainted box and buried anywhere.

More than once Elizabeth had been tempted (by the Devil, no doubt) to ask whether Kate would be willing to be cremated. The question would be too cruel. Elizabeth felt sure that somewhere in Kate's subconsciousness there was hope that she

would be recognized by her loved ones and that she would recognize them in the afterlife--that the Lord would give flesh to her skeleton on Judgment Day. Kate professed to believe, tried to believe, that nothing of this world mattered.

Elizabeth bought wallpaper of mediocre quality and barely caught herself in time to keep from saying aloud that she had not bought expensive paper because... That would have been enough. Kate would have known immediately that Elizabeth didn't expect to stay in the house long, and, if not, what move did she have in mind? Elizabeth had been unnerved by the near-slip, which served to impress her with the danger of such slips to come.

After carrying comforters into the bedroom, Elizabeth came back to the kitchen, where Kate was pouring milk from a gallon pail into a glass. Elizabeth had bought a cow, and Charlie Iversen, the caretaker of the grove, had agreed to look after the cow for half the milk. Unlike most farm girls, Elizabeth had never learned to milk. She had wanted to learn --to emulate Mark, but Kate had made such a fuss...talked about refinement. Kate had always drunk raw milk and preferred it warm from the cow. Was that refinement? She believed milk consumed in that state furnished more than the ordinary nourishment.

Kate had a desperate craving for something tart. Would Elizabeth squeeze orange juice? That was another reason they

had decided California was the place for Kate--fruit was plentiful all the year 'round.

Elizabeth squeezed several oranges, filling the glass twice. Kate drank noisily and staggered off to bed.

The kitchen table creaked as Elizabeth slumped beside it exhausted. Five o'clock...under pressure since ten. She was not asleep, however. A few hours of reading would give her release from tensions.

She changed to corduroy slacks, wool shirt, wool socks, and flat shoes. She was shivering from the evening air and despising herself for it. Too much like Kate physically. Coming in from the car, she had felt superior, condescending, impregnable, invincible. She had pitied the creature that was her mother. In an hour's time, her hands and feet had become icy. Her feeling of superiority was shaken. It was not a comforting thought that at twenty-five Kate's circulatory system had probably been as efficient as her own was now at that age.

She made a fire in the range and put on a kettle of water. Kate would be calling for a hot water bottle soon. Two or three bricks kept on the stove would be better than a hot water bottle. They wouldn't require as much attention. And the water bottle would probably break in bed before the year...six months was gone.

She got her copy of Anna Karenina and sat near the window for light, tipped back in the rocker with her feet on the table.

She never read satisfactorily with her feet on the floor. Pape had always sat tipped back in his chair, an old ladder-back, propping himself, rather unsteadily at times, against the wall.

At 6:30 she stopped reading to look about for food. Eggplant, squash... She finally decided upon a sandwich and coffee.

Medga had kept the iron stove that was in the house when she bought the place. The kitchen cabinet was an eyesore, with its paint scaling and its bulk protruding grotesquely. There was scarcely room to turn around between the cabinet and the stove. The table, its two chairs, and the inevitable rocker filled the remaining space. The fresh wallpaper in a small greenish-blue conventional design relieved the confusion somewhat. Mergie, the caretaker's wife, had done the papering. It was a neat job except the corner above the cabinet.

With sandwich and coffee prepared, Elizebeth placed the chair with its rockers parallel to the table and read while she ate. For a moment she lost the content of the book as she warned herself about food habits. At first she had prepared hot meals every day. But meal preparation for a single person seemed such a waste of time, and the choice of foods was limited... Steaks and salad, chops and salad...her favorite foods, but tirasoma after prolonged repetition. Casserole dishes for one were out of the question. It was useless to try to get

Kate interested in food. Her "ineides" were not able to digest anything but milk (which more than one doctor had assured her was as difficult to digest as lean meat) and fruit juices. As if she hadn't had indigestion for twenty years on that diet. But anyone was a fool to argue with Kate. You ended by hearing yourself accused of being one of numerous and unnamed perpetrators of a plot.

Elizabeth settled to her book. On reading a passage of characterization, she was struck with the aptness of it as applied to Kate. "...her object is doing good; she's a Christian, yet she's always angry; and she always has enemies, and enemies in the name of Christianity and doing good." Tolstoy said it was ludicrous, but it became more than that when the character was one's mother, with the attitude promising to become more intense with time.

Shortly after eight Kate came tottering to the kitchen, shading her eyes with one hand. Elizabeth got up, pushed the rocker toward the stove and put a fresh chunk in the fire. Kate thrust her feet into the oven. She would never have adapted herself to a house without a kitchen range. She sipped the milk with closed eyes--El Greco's Christ of The Crucifixion.

Elizabeth filled the water bottle and pinned it inside an old stocking cap. Kate took it and went off again to bed.

Elizabeth was tempted to put her own feet into the oven. No one besides herself would know it. But...what was that

overworked expression?...she was her own soverest critic. Her self-respect, her feeling of superiority would suffer more and more if she drifted into Kate's ways. She dragged the rocker back to the end of the table and propped up her feet again.

At ten o'clock she stretched and got up groaning with stiffness. Her feet were numb. The fire had gone out, and there was not a second water bottle, even if there were hot water. She could try rubbing her feet, but it never did any good. There would be wakeful hours, in spite of exhaustion. One inherited such physical tendencies, of course; the problem was the brain cells. They, too, were physical and subject to degeneration. Was Kate unable to reason, or did she refuse to do so because of unwillingness to face an inevitable upset in her way of life, her religious beliefs? Her long suffering in poor health had brought rewards in attention, sympathy, martyrdom.

While Elizabeth lay awake with cold feet she recalled Tolstoy's casual summing up in his use of the phrase "Wer-tarish passion." She didn't remember to which one of his characters the phrase was applied, but she was annoyed that the implications were especially clear because of her own youthful infatuations. First, there was Ernst. No, there had been someone before that. Did these childish imbecilities have any bearing on her recently reached conclusion that knowledge is disillusionment, which is death? Would it be

necessary to discuss these infatuations with George in order to bring herself to satisfactory attitude?

After a time she drifted into one of her two stock dreams. She was looking down a long street in the business section of a small city. There were no people or vehicles in sight, and the stores appeared to be deserted. From the far end of the street a figure in a long garment came hurrying. Glancing about in fright, it tried each door in desperation.

The figure was always quite near before she identified herself with it. The long garment which she wore in the dream was one of the heavy flannel nightgowns that Kate had had made for her daughters--voluminous, high-necked, long-sleeved, hatefully itchy and hot, except in sub-zero weather. Kate herself had never worn any other style of night dress. The only variation had been in material. Years earlier Kate had worn a muslin gown in summer, but there was no longer a change with seasons.

Elizabeth awakened to hear Kate calling. Two o'clock. She padded sleepily through the living room. The water bottle was cold. In the kitchen she found the woodbox empty. Disgusting. She could never remember to bring in wood before going to bed. A heating pad would solve the problem. However, electric pads were supposed to be dangerous for sick people, without someone in attendance. Electric shock.

Maybe that would be a good idea, if fatal. Better not think that way. Might show.

Ever since she could remember she had wished that Kate would die, but she had never tried to expose her to danger, nor had she previously even considered (seriously, at least) doing so. If she failed in what she thought of as a deed of mercy, a year-long deed of mercy...she couldn't think beyond that...no point in thinking beyond.

She went back to tell Kate there was no wood. She would get some from the shed. Then she put on socks, shoes, coat and carried flashlight and basket. She'd never had many fears, but she was afraid of rats--almost nothing besides rats and human beings.

The air was frosty. There was bright moonlight--she scarcely needed the flashlight inside the shed. Charlie would probably have to smudge. There was a system of alarm bells connected with a thermometer to awaken him when there was danger of frost. The first time Kate heard the alarm she had been frightened out of her wits, thought it an announcement of Doomeday. It had been impossible to convince her that it was not a plot.

With three chunks of wood and some kindling in the basket, Elizabeth went back to the house. She adjusted the damper in the stovepipe and the drafts at the front of the stove, arranged kindling and wood. The first trial at lighting was unsuccessful. She was trying a second match when the alarm sounded. She hurried through the dark living room, and upon reaching

the doorway of Kate's room, said as calmly as possible, "It's the frost alarm."

Kate was sitting up in bed, the woolen stocking cap drawn low on her forehead. She blinked a little at the light, but it was not painful to her, as sunlight seemed to be. She was a nocturnal creature, open-eyed, alert at night.

"I haven't slept a wink. My stomach is gnawing. Would you squeeze some oranges?" She hadn't taken fright at the alarm. That was how one was repaid for worry.

Elizabeth hated squeezing oranges next to washing dishes. But she had to stay up anyway to wait for the water to heat. When she came back with juice and a glass of milk, Kate asked in the martyr's voice, "Would you warm my milk? It chills my insides so." She didn't want anyone to do anything for her. She had gotten into this terrible condition taking care of her babies. They should be willing to care for her, but if they were ungrateful...

These little services of squeezing oranges and warming milk in the middle of the night had to borne with apparent alacrity. Let her play the martyr all she wanted to. The real persecution complex would show itself soon now.

By the time the milk was warmed and the water bottle filled, Elizabeth, too, was wide awake. She would have liked to read until she was sleepy, but Kate would not allow that. She would want to talk, and that was always dangerous. And

if Kata saw her daughter reading a book, she would want to know what it contained. One had to be careful to circumvent discussion of literature. Kata believed the Bible (and "fundamentalist" literature concerning the Bible) contained the only worthwhile information.

A walk in the night air was even more out of the question. Kata was afraid of night and she was suspicious of anyone who was not. People who loved darkness did so because their deeds were evil.

In bed again, Elizabeth began to recall nights of her childhood. She had wanted to risk any dangers in darkness of night rather than become the coward Kate was.

During the first two years on the farm, she had come to think of night as a friend. The four young McKennas had slept out-of-doors on hayracks in summer. The big barn was an exciting, mysterious place at night when light of the lantern blinded pigeons in the rafters and struck fire in the stallion's eyes. The rustling that might mean rats stimulated enough fear to give sharpness to a nocturnal visit to the barn.

There was a certain night--she must have been six or seven--that she had got plum juice on her hand and, thinking it to be blood, had cried fearfully until someone, probably Mark, had uncovered her mistake. Her feelings had been so deeply hurt by open ridicule and sly remarks which followed the revelation that she fled out-of-doors, taking refuge in the back of the old farm truck. She would stay there all

night. Nothing they could say or do would move her. Shivering, she thought of pneumonia. If she died they would be sorry for having been so mean to her. She saw herself dead...Mark turning away from her caasket thinking her the most beautiful, the most intelligent girl that had ever breathed. And the way she could ride a horse! (Elizabeth hadn't yet been allowed to ride alone.) He had been cruel to this unmatched sister. It was too late now. He could never even tell her he was sorry. He would never get over it until the day he died.

But it was not Mark who came to beg Elizabeth to come into the house. It was Martha--frightened as she was of the darkness; Elizabeth always had to go with her to the toilet at night. Tom, on his way from the wellhouse with a bucket of water, had spied her light dress in a corner of the truck bed and had told Martha to bring her in.

"Papa might get mad and come and get you," Martha quavered. Elizabeth was silent, wishing she hadn't got herself into such a predicament. She finally agreed to sneak in with Martha through the front door and pretend they had been in the house all the time. Mamma was in the asylum then; so there was no one sleeping in the front room.

During her first year in high school Elizabeth had walked alone at night from the farm to town and from the school auditorium to the farm with only an occasional thought for old Will Beavere wandering around with his hound or for crazy Luke Fisher. Neither of them had ever attacked anyone. The next year Martha had started to high school and the two sisters

had gone about at night a great deal. It was a relief from the restrictions of the daytime.

That second year she had written a poem about night. She had labored and worried over it so intensely that it was still in her mind to recall.

I love the night.
It holds for me no evil spell
Nor tears, nor fearful tolling bell...

No, she had decided upon knell rather than bell. Always use the less common word in poetry. She smiled to herself, remembering the great decision between the two words...

Nor tears, nor fearful tolling knell,
Nor shrinking fright.

At that point she realized she was protesting against Kate's fears. She had tried in the next verse to express the positive, the beautiful.

Beneath the sweep of spangled skies,
Or even be it starless dome,
With ruthless wind, da, da, di, da...

And then hadn't she decided she was spreading it on too thick?

They had been studying metre in English literature. Mr. Edwards had given them a choice of writing a short poem or memorizing "The Recessional." Her mind had jumped immediately to composing. The others smirked at one another, believing their expressions to be esoteric. Knowing that Mr. Edwards saw and understood, Elizabeth was embarrassed. (She needn't have suffered; Mr. Edwards didn't seem to mind.)

The expressions said: Who'd be such a fool to write pomes?
I wouldn't have nothin' to do with nobody 'at wrota pomes.
I couldn't write a poem if I tried...It'd be too much work
anyway and they'd all laugh at me.

Elizabeth had worked secretly and had dreamed about the praise and amazement Mr. Edwards would give forth. But at the same time she had scoffed with others at the idea that any of them might write a poem. She changed her rhymes a number of times and finally became so critical that she gave up. She thought then that she had known all the time she would never offer the poem at school. She memorized "The Recessional" the night before the assignment was due.

It was three o'clock and Kate was belching. anyone ought to know that a quantity of milk and orange juice in the middle of the night is not going to rest easy on the stomach. Just as she didn't ask to have her back massaged! There was no end to the massaging and Kate's flesh made Elizabeth think of rotting fish.

There was one of the nights in the Texas Panhandle when Kate had announced she was dying. Kate and Elizabeth were staying in a small house about a quarter of a mile from the farm. The farm sale had taken place; Matt and the boys were moving the furniture to a house across town. Matt had got the use of the small house for a few days because Kate wanted to get away from the uproar. The second night they were there, Kate awakened Elizabeth to say she wanted Matt

to come.

"I know I won't live through the night."

"I hate to wake Papa," Elizabeth said. Then she realized that she might as well have said she didn't believe Kate was dying.

"You don't care what happens to me. You wouldn't wake Matt when I'm dying."

"Oh, I'll go," Elizabeth said. She was glad to go, to get away from complaining and accusations. Poor Papa...

She went out into the summer night in thin pajamas, her feet bare. In the bright moonlight she cast a black shadow that seemed no less an entity than herself. The air cooled, ceased. Across the way the farm was ghostly still. She felt a strange sense of being observed from far reaches of the universe. The shadow was pointing her out to some being in interstellar space. If she could flash a glance more rapid than lightning she would be able to surprise the observer. She chilled at the distant wail of a train whistle...the keening voices of dogs answering separated flesh and soul. She forced herself to walk slowly and, half-fearful, she went into space a dare. After a few seconds she laughed aloud.

At the farmhouse door she hesitated, looked across the sky and dropped her eyes to the sleeping town, quiet amid its black shadows. She must call now...at the sound of her voice the mystery would vanish...

II

"Let's not talk about anything sordid," Elizabeth said. "I'm feeling fresh today."

George filled his pipe from a leather pouch and settled back.

"How about a good argument?" she urged. "Do you like to argue about things that can't possibly be proved?"

"Such as...?"

"Oh...the effects of heredity and environment on personality...ah, you could probably squelch me in short order on that one."

George smiled thoughtfully and chewed his pipe stem.

"Brandishing impressive terms wouldn't stop me. I'm stubborn."

"I remember that about you...in German class especially."

Elizabeth blushed. "Pretty terrible, wasn't it? But I refuse to be bothered by the past...today or in the future."

"You are feeling bright."

A little too well, she thought. Possibly mild euphoria. George was considering that, too...a hint of uneasiness in his eyes...

The waiter brought a Martini and a glass of sherry.

"Do you drink whiskey sours?" George asked.

"It's better for me to stay away from anything danger-

ously habit forming."

"Do people figure that out ahead of time?"

"I'm naturally intemperate."

"It's easy to drink too much wine."

She sipped the sherry...delightful, clean, unclouded sensation...sharply defined, defiant, straightforward. Frank, but not honest. If frankness is honesty, still not the honesty of fig leaf and black lace gown, of perfume and condiments superimposed on decaying flesh, nor honesty of one alone to be my own because God made you mine... Our heavenly Father expects us to...the Lord commands us ...onward Christian soldiers to make the world safe for democracy--for Negro, Jew and Greek...it's a sin to show your nakedness...Santa Claus won't bring you anything if ...yes, Jonah was inside the whale for three days...now, Elizabeth, you know you are not telling the truth; why do you go around saying you have a white rabbit?

Elizabeth tapped her glass and said, "Nice."

"Here, too," George said.

"And I'll pay for mine."

"Don't be silly. I'm not a struggling medical student ..."

"It's the principle..." He interrupted her.

"By the way, how are you to be supported during the year?"

"The family are chipping in."

"You're so independent, I thought perhaps..."

"I'd work? And take Mamma to work with me?"

"You used to be independent and stubborn as hell."

"Still am. I'll worry about boring you and I'll be afraid you pity me. I can't bear to be pitied."

"I won't let you bore me and I doubt if I'll pity you."

"Going to keep it objective... George, you don't... I'm supposed to be the patient, but...you don't sound happy."

"No...I don't submit to analysis. You remain the subject." He was trying to sound amused, but there was a hint of impatience.

She sipped the sherry. Judge not that ye be not judged ...always presiding, officiating---and wondering why it was so. "Curiosity's the drive," she said. "Does it have to be labeled 'idle curiosity?'"

"You could make it 'intellectual curiosity.' Sounds more important."

"Either one is escapism..."

"Probably."

"You're learning about me...listening to me judge the purpose...the beginning...the end..."

"You judge yourself too severely."

"Relax. Take the world as it is..."

"Is compromise so bad?"

She studied him for a moment. "Do you drink too much, George?"

"Damn it, Liz, will you stop?" He was plainly irritated.

"Ha, we are on excellent terms, now. You're swearing at me and calling me Liz. How I hated you when you first called me Liz. But then I came to realize that I was pleasing you by showing my nasty disposition."

"You and Martie called me Lemon Face."

"I had forgotten..."

"That was cruel, you know. I was recovering from yellow jaundice. Your family had just moved to Edgerton."

"We didn't know... Of course, Martie and I, and Mark, too, were ready to take offense at the slightest hint... and tried to send it back worse than we got it..."

"Tom...? No, that's right---Tom was pretty easy-going."

"To be like Tom..." Elizabeth sighed.

"Refill?"

Elizabeth nodded and George beckoned to the waiter.

"Don't let me drink any more after this," she said.

"I thought you didn't drink. You seem to know what results to expect."

Elizabeth shook her head. "The other day you suggested a cocktail. I said it would be my first."

"You've had experience with wine?"

"I...yes. I'll tell you some time. It's involved."

He shrugged. "Nothing unexpected from your...mother?"

"Nothing serious, so far."

"How long will it last?"

"Any time now..." She opened her purse and felt in in absentmindedly.

"Cigaretto?"

"Oh...of course, I don't have any," she said. "I don't dare keep them around."

He got up and walked with the remembered slouch to the bar. It was the first time during their two meetings that she had really seen him. His gray tweed suit was well cut, too soft to hold a press. His feet, hands and head were large, his shoulders still as thin as in his 'teens, when he had tuberculosis. People in Edgerton had remarked---more often than was needful---that it was a good thing George's father was a doctor; otherwise, he probably wouldn't have survived all his diseases and disorders.

When they were settled again George said, "That experience with wine..."

"O. K. I hardly know how to begin... It was two years ago--my second year at college. I went to live with an R. O. T. C. officer's family at the fort...drove back and forth. From the first day I spent there until the last I learned things...things I couldn't have learned anywhere else...things I hadn't been aware of..."

"What sort of things?"

"I don't know exactly... I learned I could be important--s power in the world...learned to dance with ease. I had always told myself I didn't care about dancing."

"What was your status in the family?"

"I tutored their daughter, mostly...did other things I hadn't agreed to do...because I enjoyed doing them... helped Mrs. Roentgen, the mother, plan and prepare dinner parties. I learned to relax in the presence of Spode and Wedgwood and Williamsburg silver; I had envied and feared people who owned fine china and silver. More important, I realized that people weren't watching me...that they were thinking about themselves and really didn't give a hang what I did. I was appreciated for getting passing grades for the daughter in high school--she'd been out for a year because of illness--I was considered a treasure by the Roentgens' acquaintances, as a good draft horse is treasured..."

"The wins..."

"Oh, yes. The Roentgens drank wine--port mostly--before dinner every evening. I wasn't used to it. It went to my head and I'd become extremely sociable and self-confident. Major Roentgen was amused at the change and one night he kept my glass full until I'd lost all sense of propriety. They told me about it afterwards. Because of a coincidence I entertained dinner guests for a whole hour. There was a colonel who always showed up late at parties several drinks to

the good. On this particular night something had stood in his way and he arrived sober. He had a habit, when he was drunk, of cornering every meek or hopelessly unattractive woman and flirting with her, holding her embarrassingly close while dancing, flattering her outrageously. Even the most...attention-starved... No woman liked it.

"Well, he came to the party late, as usual, and by that time I was the Queen of Sheba. I made it my special interest to look after him...led him to a corner and told him how splendid and handsome he was--adorable, too, probably...patted his cheek...asked him if he would do me the great favor of dancing with me...clung to him... Oh, how awful it must have been! The colonel left early and I gave my attention to a visiting British officer, confiding that I felt the German people were not all bad, but merely hoping to regain a place for themselves in the world. If I hadn't been drunk I'd have been brought to account for that. It was more than I could take, when I found out about it. It came out bit by bit...everyone had watched me make a fool of myself..."

"You had decided for a time that people weren't watching you and then this..."

"It was as if someone had told me I had been walking in my sleep naked downtown. Now, it makes a good story and I look at myself from the outside when I tell it. And I'm not so afraid of people... But there's something else. After finding I could be important, I didn't care about it. That's

always the result, George. When I can have something, I don't want it... That applies to men, too."

"Then marriage is out."

"Yes... I'm afraid so."

"You regret?" He feigned surprise.

"Lonely old age," she sighed. "George, shouldn't marriage produce children?"

"If possible."

"In my case, aside from the possibilities of inherited mental weaknesses, children...from any marriage of mine... would be my children, and that wouldn't be good for them, not to consider their father..."

"How can you know all this?"

"Marti could tell you. I tried to run her household. At least, I knew when to leave--or almost. Before I left I was telling her I wouldn't stand for my husband belonging to any silly secret organization. I was telling her how to bring up her child..." Elizabeth saw that her hands were trembling. "But if I stop, there'll be no meaning... There's nothing left now but intellect. I'm no longer impressed by massiveness, physical beauty, money... I wish I were."

"You keep up appearances..."

"I can for a time--with every new acquaintance. Now... I'm attacking a project which may be impossible. Everyone advised me against it; I suppose that's the reason I'm determined to do it. There'll have to be a project at the end of

the year, and another, and another..."

"Well, if that's all," George said, "impossible projects are never hard to find."

III

"My name is Harrington," the man said. "I'm pastor of the Methodist church in Bingham Beach."

"Yea?" Elizabeth said. She knew he expected to enter, but her Irish stubbornness would not allow her to ask him in. "We are Baptists," she said.

"We are all the Lord's children, aren't we, Miss...?"

"My mother doesn't think so."

"Is your mother at home?"

Elizabeth felt like laughing in his face. Was her mother at home? Of course, he couldn't know.

"She's resting." He would stand there until she insulted him, and Kate would hear. Kate always heard when you didn't want her to. Yes, she was coming now...house slippers shuffling through the living room. Well, leave them to it.

Kate appeared in her Indian blanket robe, the reds in it bringing out strongly the sallowness of her skin, her hair straggling from beneath the stocking cap.

Mr. Preacher, you have before you the earthly personification of the antithesis of vanity. Elizabeth excused herself, saying she had work to do. Later Kate would tell her she had been rude to the man (one should never overlook an opportunity to bring a soul to salvation; there might be hope even for a Methodist preacher) and, in the meantime, Kate would explain to him that Methodists were lost. They didn't believe "once

saved always saved." They spoke of "backsliding." And their aprinkling waan't Baptism; why did Jesus walk down into the water, if a spoonful of water shaken on his head would have been sufficient?

Elizabeth went to her bedroom to read. Patrick followed, touching her heels with his wet nose. She pulled her chair to the window for light. As the thoughts on the page claimed her attention, the dingy striped wallpaper, iron bed, scarred furniture were obliterated, but the walls of the house were thin and in the margin of her consciousness danced phrases of the conflict in the kitchen. Saved, lost, salvation, redeemed, judgment...baptism, immersion, symbol. Oh, Mr. Preacher, let us have no symbols. Truth is truth. Next you will be saying Christ's miracles are fairy tales and the Old Testament stories legends. Methodist, Baptist...and how about Covenanters and Seventh-Day Adventist?

Back in the days when the McKennas were Covenanters they could find no Covenanter girls doing housework, and finally Kate agreed to a Seventh-Day Adventist girl, whose beliefs she felt would be less dangerous of all denominations outside the pale. She sent the girl away on the third day, having found that although the Adventists believed in the Bible as the supreme law and in Jesus Christ as ruler of all nations; were active in foreign missions and favored enlightening the Indians of Oklahoma, the Negroes of Alabama, the Jews of Philadelphia, the Syrians of Pittsburg; were correctly informed on

immersion and evangelism; yet they admitted to the ordinance of baptism children of parents who were not church members and they allowed anyone who called himself a Christian to partake of the Lord's supper.

Now through the thin walls Elizabeth heard the inevitable, "Let us pray together, Mrs. McKenna and ask the Lord to reveal the truth to all..." Kate could hardly turn down such an offer. "...where's your daughter?"

Elizabeth was panic stricken. The window? There wasn't time. Kate was already coming. She would have to go through with it. If she could only remember Papa's prayer...all we like sheep have gone astray, every one to his own way...nothing more would come. Oh, yes...led as a lamb to the slaughter...laid on him the iniquity of us all... That wasn't enough.

Kate was at the door. "The minister would like to have us pray together," she said in her melancholy voice.

"Oh. All right," Elizabeth said. Oh, Lord, give me something to say.

Kate had led the Reverend Mr. Harrington into the living room. He was considering the small water color of the clam digger, which she had carried around with her for five years.

"Do you paint?" he asked Elizabeth.

"No. That isn't mine,--I mean, my work."

"She does paint," Kate said. There was a mere hint of pride...Elizabeth took no interest in painting religious subjects.

"Shall we pray?" Elizabeth said suddenly. The tone was hardly solemn enough. It sounded too much like "I just love to pray" or "Let's do get on with the praying."

They knelt at three chairs and the minister led off with a generous admission of sins for all mankind. After his "Amen" he said, "Miss McKenna?"

She heard herself saying unexpectedly, "God of our fathers known of old, Lord of our far-flung battle line,"...Oh, God, the rhyme will give it away; I'll have to change it. "Beneath whose--righteous hand we hold dominion over land and sea..." Not bad. "Lord God Jehovah be with us--for we are weak and sinful." A glow of triumph. "Amen," with sincere gratitude.

The preacher rustled and Kate began, her voice trembling with emotion; Elizabeth put her hand to the back of her neck, where tenseness was beginning. "Oh, Lord, deliver us from our enemies..."

Hitler, Eunice, the Red Menace...

"Smite down those who persecute us... May our loved ones see the way of salvation before it is too late..."

The three of them got up, Elizabeth relieved, the preacher, expansive, Kate envelling.

Now the preacher was asking them to attend the revival meetings in Bingham Beach. The great evangelist, Tom Bundy, was conducting meetings at the tent.

"If the Lord sees fit to give me strength..." Kate said.

Elizabeth was not disturbed. By the time Kate was dressed for attending a meeting, she would be exhausted "to the point of collapse."

"If my mother is able," Elizabeth said, "I'll bring her."

"You could come anyway, Miss McKenna," he said.

"Oh, I don't leave Mamma alone." Kate appreciated such solicitude.

"I'm sure for the salvation of her children..."

"Oh, I've been converted." Elizabeth spoke too glibly and he suspected her. "...when I was twelve years old."

"Well that's fine; that's fine." He laughed heartily.

"We'd like to have you sing in our choir during the meetings."

Are you a jolly Christian Reverend Sir? I don't think you have precedent in the New Testament for your facetiousness. Jesus wept.

"I don't sing well at all," she said.

"Anyone who sings the Lord's praises has a beautiful voice."

"If Mamma doesn't mind..." Elizabeth said, feeling again the revulsion she had felt at twelve--ugly frame church, hard pews, shouting evangelists.

And there was Kate standing several rows back praying and weeping for the souls of her children, Matt beside her uncomfortable... Elizabeth aware that someone was pushing past the girls at the end of the pew, and then Mrs. Bartlett, the Caterpillar, pleading in a tearful voice...twelve years old, age of

accountsbility...poor mother...all you have to do is repent
 ...Elizsbeth neither looking nor answering. No sins...don't
feel sinful...fslee, shameful...I won't, I won't... Nervee
 taut, face burning, heart besting wildly, perspiring copiously,
 trombling, hating, hsting, hating...ehrinking from the arm
 around her shoulders... Mre. Bartlett moving sorrowfully away;
 the girls wstching, scorning; Mamma watching, deepsiring; Paps
 wstching, sympstizing, resigned... Paps--for Papa's sake...
 She tried to make the move. All you had to do was to command
 your lege to move and close your mind. It would be easier to
 face Satan than to etand up there and shake their|hande as they
 filed paet...the hand of jolly Christian fellowship. She would
 hate them all hor life. She would make them feel her hate.
 But no, she couldn't...for Papa's sake. For his sake, she
 would allow herself to be crushed and beaten. Shamed--woret
 of sll, ehamed. Get it over with--now. How could she pos-
 eibly go through with it?

Prescher shouting: Laet chance, dear friend...almost,
 but lost. Blessed numbnees dulling hate. She was moving now
 to the stake. First, the soft moist hand resching from the
 black sleeve...then the blur of faces, esd, triumphant. No
 matter. It would soon be over. Born again, they ssid--more
 like death. Stand there; let them shake the hand; it isn't
your hand. To lose consciousness..oblivion. Kate now, smoth-
 ering the body, the mind...kisees, tears, praying lips. To
 epew, to lash out and atand free! But no--only endure...

"We'll be expecting you, Miss McKenna," the Reverend Mr. Harrington said.

"If ~~Mamma~~ doesn't mind being left alone," Elizabeth said.

"We'll see how I feel," Kate said. "I have gone feelings so much of the time and such terrible pains in my..."

"The Lord chastiseth his own," Mr. Harrington said.

"...and as if I were walking on jelly," Kate said.

"What is that you're reading, Miss McKenna?" Mr. Harrington asked.

She hadn't realized she was carrying the book; her right index finger was numb from holding the place. "The subject is tolerance," she said.

"Oh," Mr. Harrington said.

"...drawing my last breath," Kate said.

IV

"I don't think you can last the year unless you get away from her occasionally," George had said three weeks earlier.

"I can't take chances," she had answered.

"Isn't there anyone she could visit even for a few days?"

"Yes, my brother, James... But I don't want to risk it," she had insisted.

"Where does he live?"

"A hundred miles south--in the valley."

"Does she get along with him?"

"As well as with me, except now, when I'm straining myself."

She had written to James and he had come for Kate. Marie was the worry. She hated Kate, who had chosen her for James's wife because of her modesty (Marie wasn't aware of that until after her marriage) and had never yet shown a sign of regret. But then Kate never admitted herself to be wrong.

Kate was to stay in the valley four days and then Elizabeth would bring her back in the car. Elizabeth had specified the length of the visit and had told James to say "a few days" in Kate's presence. Kate must not feel too much restricted or rebellion would be sure to result.

Tomorrow afternoon--Sunday, Elizabeth was to go for her.

"You're looking better," George said. "You were getting ragged." They were in a corner of the roof garden at a small table.

"This is too perfect," she said, making a small sweeping gesture toward the starlit sky. "I feel like a starved person who is suddenly presented a great deal of rich food."

"I feel that way, too," George said. "I haven't been getting out much myself." He looked at her pointedly and added, "That dress is good on you...black."

"Yes, I like it,--my first, and perhaps last, dancing dress. I wore it to a military ball."

"It shouldn't be your last."

The dress fitted snugly from neckline to hips and the skirt flared slightly below the hipline. The high keyhole neckline and short sleeves made it almost Puritanical among the bare backs and shoulders about them. In general the dress and the uncurled hair and the paucity of jewelry gave the effect of high fashion and snobbishness.

"Do you ever wear anything frilly?" George asked.

"Why?" Elizabeth eyes flashed curiosity. The question was purely rhetorical; he thought it would do her good to be "frilly." "I like to look at ribbons and froth," she said, "but..."

"Do you want to dance?" They should be enjoying their evening out.

"I haven't danced for some time."

She was stiff at first, but gradually relaxed.

"Remember that night at Barney's?"

He nodded. "When I think of it now, I know why Dad didn't

want me there."

"We were just kids..." She didn't bring her own father's objections into the discussion.

"Yeah. You understand later, but kids won't listen."

"Jake Osborne used to dance with all the high school girls. He got hold of me once. I wanted to kill him, and I couldn't even make a scene. I've always hated scenes."

"What was the matter with Jake? He had a good wife. Lily was a wonderful wife."

"Too good maybe. But that isn't the answer, anyway."

"What is the answer?"

"God knows. This, for the time being."

It was all anyone could ask for. Two souls wondering together. And why was it, Elizabeth thought, that the fleshly contact of a brother animal was reassuring? For years she had prided herself on being self-sufficient. But she had been acid about it, and the acid had eaten...

"George, may I bore you with a story...another story?" she asked as they went to the table. The champagne was in her veins.

He said sure.

"Dancing brought it to mind," she said. "When I was a freshman in high school--that was the year before we moved to Edgerton--there was a boy that I idolized, an athlete. I wasn't the only one that idolized him." She paused, reflecting. "I think in the 1920's on the Texas plains the

athlete was taking the place of the cowboy. There was a basketball team of five brothers, all over six feet tall...beauties!

"But this boy, Weatherby Blackstone, was a miracle. He could snap the ball through the net from the opposite end of the court. The crowds yelled themselves hoarse.

"I thought there should be a feeling of kinship between us because his family was poor and proud like mine. He was always friendly toward me, but gradually I came to believe that he was reluctant to have anything to do with me because of Kate. Of course, that made me very haughty."

George was studying her face, the long line from cheekbone to chin, the hollows which showed the evolutionary shrinking of the jaws. She didn't know (or did she) that their estrangement had been because of Kate. He remembered a tightness about her mouth that was no longer there.

"...in awe of him for years and there he was asking me to go to a dance with him. (No one else in that town had ever asked to take me to a dance.) But it was too late. I wasn't in awe of him any more. I didn't even admire him. And I thought to myself how horrible it would have been if we had come together when we were seventeen or eighteen and had been married." Elizabeth's eyelids were drooping and she was smiling. "Since then he's married and appears to be very happy. Has a nice home, attractive wife, healthy children...and I'm envious. But envious without wanting to

do anything about it."

"I still don't think you had natural conditions to judge from when you were living with Martio."

"No, the conditions weren't natural." The smile twisted slightly. "I was an outsider. I watched and envied while I told myself that it was all too restricted and prosaic for me."

"Is that all?"

Elizabeth glanced up at him. "Are you suggesting that I might have been in love with my brother-in-law?"

"I wasn't accusing you. Falling in love isn't limited to free, white and twenty-one."

"No. In fact it seems to work the other way with me. By the time I was twenty-one I was through falling in love."

"Disillusioned early," George smiled.

"Oh, I'm glad to be through with it. There's so much torture...uncertainty, jealousy, shame."

Will we ever get around to discussing our split-up? George thought. "All of that," he said, "in your 'teens."

"They say Shakespeare's Juliet was only fourteen. But that's not all. I gave my right hand to someone who didn't want it and someone else who didn't attract me gives me his right hand.... It seems to me I could have never wanted anything I could have. The desirability varies with the unavailability, or something like that."

"Elizabeth," George said. "I can tell you now what you need."

"Yes?" He was about to point the way to happiness.

"Stop reading intellectual books. You should live on a farm--at least, with animals that depend on you. You don't need psychiatry; you need outdoor life..."

"Yes,"...she nodded.

"And I think you ought to try marriage. Many people fail in marriage when they feel certain of success. You...might succeed feeling certain of failure."

"The risk is too great." She was tired, had lost her proud pose; her lipstick needed renewing. A sudden cool breeze made her shiver.

"Shall I get your coat?"

"Yes, let's go," she said in a flat, heavy voice.

It was a quarter of twelve. They walked silently the two blocks to reach the place where Elizabeth's car was parked. The swish, swish of her tulle skirt over taffeta and the clicking of her heels filled the gaps between the dim sounds from restaurants end here.

When Elizabeth was at the steering wheel, they said good-night self-consciously, both considering and rejecting an attempt at renewal of old relations. It had been too long....

"James, if you won't make your mother turn that radio off," Marie said, "I'm going to San Berdoe and I'm not coming back tonight."

"And where would you stay all night in San Berdoe?"

"Any place," she said. "That voice! It's like sandpaper!"

"You must feel guilty, to have a sermon bother you so much."

"Sermon! That's just plain ranting. He hasn't said a thing I haven't heard a million times. And that shouting! Why doesn't he talk like a human? It's an insult to have someone shout at you like that."

"I don't feel insulted."

"Now, listen, James! She's had three of them screaming..." Marie lowered her voice and breathed between closed teeth, "before this one."

James should have been disturbed by her language; his indifference worried Marie. "She's my mother," he said in an injured tone.

"If she'd been mine I'd done something about her long before this."

"She's a Christian woman, at least."

Marie laughed. "You mean I'm not. But James, I've been washed in the blood of the lamb. Don't you remember?"

"Shut your foul mouth," he said.

"I could charge you with extreme cruelty for those words."

"Are you talking about divorce?"

"No," she said. "No, I'm deeply in love with you."

He walked out of the house toward the orange grove. Marie watched him go. There was something wrong with James... this not caring about things...and his eyes...something odd about his eyes...and his legs. His appetite was all right...

Jimmy flashed by the window, running after the terrier. Handsome boy; she kept him well-dressed. She'd see to it he didn't have to work...he'd have money and a car of his own. He was not going to be ruined by religion. She took advantage of every opportunity to stay at home from church and to keep Jimmy at home. The people who attended the Baptist Church were narrow-minded, had no taste.

In Kate's room the shouting rose to a frenzy. "...without redemption. Oh, my brother..."

Kate had insisted this morning that they go to church without her, but Marie had pretended to be shocked at the proposal. "Leave you here alone?" she had exclaimed. "That'd be a fine way to treat you, Mother." James hadn't dared question her motive openly. But all those radio sermons... Marie turned suddenly and went to the fuse box on the back porch. She pulled the lever gingerly. The house was quiet. She walked to the sink and continued to peel potatoes. Within a few seconds she heard Kate shuffling across the bedroom.

"My radio's gone bad," Kate said uncertainly. "I wonder..."

"Oh. Let's see if the lights... We must have a fuse gone." Marie snapped the wall switch twice. "I'll get a new fuse." She climbed to the top of a high stool to look into the cupboard.

Kate stood helplessly by in her Indian blanket robe, stocking cap, and worn felt slippers. She peered aimlessly upward, occupied with the hope that the radio would start working so that she could hear the rest of her sermon. As her sight encompassed the expanse of bare thigh above narrow high heels and wickedly thin stockings, her eyes opened wider than they had for a matter of months. Of course, Elizabeth wore the same kind of clothes, but not as extreme. The skirts were not as short nor the stockings as thin.

There was something suggestive of degeneracy in Marie... Kate pushed the thought away--she had chosen a wife for James. You couldn't admit you were wrong, or they would rush in from all sides and tear you to pieces. You even had to lie sometimes to save yourself. The Lord would forgive such lies. There were Samson and David...and Peter. Jesus had forgiven Peter's cowardly denial and he would forgive a poor weak woman's cowardice in the face of her enemies.

The porch door slammed and Marie came down hastily from the stool.

"Do you know where the fuses are?" Marie asked. She had not removed one which was supposed to be burned out. She was afraid of electricity. It had been all she could do to pull the switch. And now, of course, James understood everything. What had brought him back from the grove so suddenly?

"What's the matter with these?" He was looking into the fuse box.

He was always asking questions--not for information, but to confuss, to cut, to try to make you feel like an idiot.

"I don't know," she said. "The elctricity went off end I thought it was the fues..."

James closed the circuit and a few seconds afterward Kate's radio was sending out its invitation for the fourth time. "Won't you come brother, sister? The Lord loves your soul. He's waiting with outstretched arms, tenderly calling." The preacher began to sing a few phrases with the congregation. "Jesus is tenderly calling you home..."

Kate went back to her bedroom consoled. She sank down beside the radio and covered her eyes with one hand in an attitude of prayer. The invitation was an indispensable part of the service. All the rest was of no account if the lost ones were not urged to come into the fold. Poor lost souls. They were to be pitied. All of her enemies were lost, but she could not bring herself to pray for them. She was afraid that deep inside she wanted them to burn in Hell. There was Eunice and there was Louise... You were supposed to pray for your enemies... "Almost persuaded..." She began to sing off key, rocking and swaying.

On the back porch, James and Marie stood looking at each other silently for a moment, and then Marie smiled in a way that said, "You win again, but it won't always be this way," and turned back to the kitchen. James's superior airs were amusing.

Elizabeth awoke at noon. Patrick was rubbing against the bed; she allowed him to jump up beside her feet to quiet him. She decided she was feeling better, for the jolt gave her only a slight twinge; she could raise her head without pain. Three hours earlier she had felt so ill that she had called George; he had examined her, diagnosed gall bladder trouble, and had gone to fetch Kate--in spite of Elizabeth's protests.

Because the room had only one window, which was on the west, there would be little light until late afternoon. The dimness was like the twilight recesses of the big barn. The barn...s refuge in time of stress. She had read many a novel, lying on the bran sacks next to the first stall, where she could reach through the planks to touch Old Pearl's flank.

Paps was almost always about the barn. He was moving from stanchion to stanchion carrying a half-bushel galvanized pail, dipping into it with a number ten fruit can. When he saw the girls he stopped. They had something on their minds.

Elizabeth had never been afraid of him, but this time... "Papo....do you know what Mamma's telling?"

"It won't surprise me," he said. "She tol' Lawrence Browns I was plottin' to kill 'or. I wouldn' hefta do much plottin'," he said grimly. Moving to the last stanchion, he dipped a canful of bran and poured it into the feed box.

"Some people probly believe this, though..."

"Nasty ol' gossips," Martha said.

"I guess the preacher believed that." Matt chuckled. He had told the preacher off. Never thought he'd do it, but it

sure was a relief. "What's she tellin' now?" If the preacher kept her another day or two he would find out he had a viper.

"She's sayin' you and Nell...you and Nell Hardy..." Elizabeth and Martha glanced at each other.

The muscles in Matt's jaw began to work. He dropped the can into the half-bushel with a clatter and hooked his thumbs under the bib of his overalls. A thin little tune came through the interstices of his teeth.

He was sorry for them, his daughters. He could stand it--had for twenty years. James had gotten out of it; Mark would be going soon; and Tom didn't seem to be bothered. But the girls were approached by the good ladies of the church. The girls heard all the gossip...

"You know it ain't so?" he said.

"Course," Martha said. "We never believed it."

"It wouldn't make any difference if it was true," Elizabeth said.

"Better not think that way." Matt worried about Elizabeth. She had a bad temper and was stubborn as a mule.

"I'd like to...kill them--all the ol'...'Kate McKenna says,' she mimicked. Martha caught her hand surreptitiously and pressed it. Matt and Nell Hardy been sleepin' together. Even worse. The pious ladies were acquainted with foul words.

Matt picked up his pails and they followed him to the bran box. He lifted the lid and tossed the buckets in. "Don't pay

no attention," he said. "Let 'em talk." Before he thought about it, he spewed out a wad of tobacco. The girls weren't supposed to know, but of course they did. Kate felt disgraced because he had taken to chewing. Plague take it, he had to do something!

Kate moved from the preacher's house; Mrs. Bartlett wanted poor Mrs. McKenna to spend a few days in her home. And then Mrs. Bartlett came to school one afternoon and called Elizabeth out of her literature class.

"I realize it is your father's influence," she said. "But think of your poor mother. Her heart is broken."

Elizabeth didn't answer. She waited until the speech was ended and then she went back into the classroom. They were all looking at her as she sat down...she wouldn't cry...

"It won't last," Elizabeth said. "Then what?"

"I don't know," Matt said. "Take a step at a time. There ain't no cure."

"Louise ought to know better, if Mamma doesn't."

"If she promises in court to take care of her..."

"Since when has Louise cared so much for Mamma?"

Matt shrugged. "Maybe she'll quit blamin' me for everything if she gets away from here," he said. Divorce. He never

thought he'd come to that. His father would rise up out of his grave... It was Louise's idea; Kate was willing...now she was. The two of them would get the sympathy. Cruelty...she'd say it was cruelty, or maybe even adultery.

"Cosch says I ought to go to McIntyre College," Mark said. "It's where he went."

"Where's that?" Elizabeth was struck suddenly with the inevitability of losing Mark. He wasn't one of the family any more. He'd be glad to get out. She became angry at the thought. Yes, he'd get out and be glad to. That was what she wanted to do--get out. All of them could go, but she must stay. She began to sink into melancholy as anger subsided. Mamma would be back. Divorce wouldn't mean anything to her. Someone would have to take care of her. They waited from day to day for Mamma to die, but she wasn't going to die.

"College takes money," Matt said. His tweed cap was pushed to the back of his head, the bill unsnapped. His chair was tilted against the wall, balancing on the back legs. Mark sat on the bench behind the table scratching the oilcloth cover with a worn fork.

"I can get a job. All I need is a hundred dollars for my first tuition."

"A hundred dollars?" Tom said. "That's a lotta money."

Matt was seeing Lawrence Castle at the cashier's window

pulling nervously at his collar (just like he had a noose around his neck) saying, "What else? What else?" while he wrote down five hundred dollars worth of cows for a hundred-dollar loan. "I'll probably haf to sell out by fall. I could mortgage some cows fer yuh, I guess."

* * *

"Mamma was there?"

"Yep. And Louise."

"I spose there was an awful stink raised," Mark said.

"Not as much as I expected." Matt's eyes were blood-shot. "Judge asked a few questions an' it was all over."

He wasn't looking at any of them."

"Course, she broke down an' bawled...Didn't have no fight in her, though." He spat out a frayed match. "I'm gonna sell out and git outa here."

You can't run far enough, Elizabeth thought. Nobody can get away from Mamma. You'll have to die before you get away from her.

* * *

Elizabeth could hear Doc and Matt on the front porch.

"Your kids won't always be with you, Matt," Doc said.

"And you have twenty or thirty years yet."

"I'm an old man, Doc, inside," Matt said. "The worst blow has been my friends turnin' against me. I hafta git out.

The kids wanta git, too. I couldn't go without them. They'll leave me, like you say, Doc. But I can't leave them."

"It's just the women that talk," Doc said. "They always talk."

* * *

Mark had been home three weeks. He had borrowed a truck to move their goods...going to use his tuition money for expenses.

But Kate would not be moved.

The dust storms were at their worst. Three black rollers since Mark had come back. Every day for Tom was dangerous. A bungled tonsilleotomy had left him weak from loss of blood. And now he was almost sure to develop dust pneumonia. Elizabeth was dipping her broom into a bucket of water to keep from stirring up a storm indoors. This old house was as bad as the one on the farm. Dust sifted and puffed around the windows.

Tom coughed weakly. "Is this too much for you?" Elizabeth asked. He moved his head in the negative, but she decided to leave the room as it was. He wouldn't object to anything.

Kate was sitting cross-legged beside Tom's pallet on the floor. The temperature was in the nineties. With heat and dust, the bedrooms were unbearable.

"Do you want anything?" Elizabeth asked Tom.

"No," Kate answered for him. "There's nothing anyone can do now."

Elizabeth frowned. Kate had given him up. She would be disappointed if he recovered. The martyred mother. She was at her best in that role.

Suddenly Elizabeth became alert. Rushed voices at the back door. Ominous restraint. Hesitation. Decision. Martha and Mark appearing in the doorway...Mark carrying a bag of groceries, which he seemed to have forgotten. Elizabeth looked from one to the other. She had known what they were about to say for an eternity already...and they hadn't yet told it.

"Papa," Mark said. His lips were stiff.

"He's...dead," Elizabeth said.

She looked at the broom in her hands and wondered what to do with it.

From his pallet in the front room Tom moaned softly. Kate rotated her head like an owl. "What is it?"

Martha turned and walked away.

Mark said, "Papa is dead."

Kate got up on all fours first, then pulled herself erect in a quick movement, brought one of her braids over her shoulder and began to remake it.

"Bring him in here," she said.

Elizabeth went out of the room with broom and bucket.

"No," Mark answered. "He doesn't belong here."

"I am the mother of his children." Kate's nostrils

flared.

Mark shook his head. "He will not be brought here."

Elizabeth and Martha slipped out the back way.

"Mark says we're leaving as soon as the funeral is over," Martha said. "He's not gonna argue with Mamma any more."

"She'll come."

They skirted the town and cut across the public grazing land to the big pasture. It was still their pasture, always would be. Money and legal transactions meant little.

One held the barbed wire; the other rolled under.

The buffalo grass was dry and brown. Scorching wind blew out of a gray eky. A prairie dog scuttled into his mound.

They walked through a bed of red ants and Elizabeth turned over a big rock with her toe. They had used to find tarantulas under the pasture rocks.

The mind would open, Elizabeth thought. She would see Papa dead and then she would know he was dead. There had been misery enough...but not death. Now the maggots would eat his flesh.... But no. In a caaket inside a vault worms could not roach him--if anyone could afford a vault. Was it important? There would finally be nothing left but the skeleton. She herself could not identify that. She and all the rest would end up the same. Why wait? The thought beat time with her walking. Why wait? Why wait? Why did anyone

wait? Everyone came to the same end. She projected herself into a closed casket beneath the ground. That was where Papa would be within a few days. Much better there.

* * *

There was to be no church service for Matt. He had lost his membership earlier in the year when the divorce was complete. Mark refused the Baptist preacher's offer to preside at the grave. Nell Hardy was a member of the Methodist Church; she asked Mark if her minister might read the service at the grave. She and Matt had decided to be married a few days before he took sick. Although the children had little admiration for Nell, they acquiesced. She had been good to Matt.

When Kate had come back telling how mean Louise was to her, Matt had gone to live at Nell Hardy's boarding house. He had been hurt, although he knew there was nothing else to do. Kate couldn't be turned away.

"I'd rather live with the devil himself," Elizabeth had said. But, of course, Papa knew. She had cursed God in her heart and at the same time denied there was a God.

"We'd a been gone in another week," Matt said. "I shoulda known."

People made a point of asking the girls about Kate to let it be known that they were aware of her presence in the house. Tongues had wagged again about Matt and Nell Hardy.

Most of the town turned out for the funeral. There was almost sure to be excitement. The kids had agreed to have a Methodist preacher and Kate had no use for Methodists, even if Nell Hardy didn't figure in it. There might even be a fight. Wouldn't that be something?

There were only a few who came to pay their last respects to Matt; most of them came to watch Kate and the children. Those kids thought they were so dead-burned high-toned. How'd they git that way--poor as Job's turkey an' a crazy ma? Tom wesn't so bad, but the rest of 'em...

Elizabeth and Mark supported Kate at the graveside. When Louise approached, Martha met her and warned, "Stay away from Mamma." Nell Hardy stood on the opposite side of the grave and never lifted her eyes to anyone.

The spectators were disappointed. Everyone but the family were leaving. Dust was blowing frightfully as the men waited to fill the grave. Mark pulled at Kate's arm to start her toward the cer. She pushed him away, and Elizabeth dropped Kate's other arm. The brother and sister moved off. Sitting in the car, they could scarcely distinguish Kate's dark figure in the murky light. When the men saw that she was going to stay until they finished filling the grave, they worked faster. She stayed until they were gone, swaying and praying. She's asking God to forgive Papa for his cruelty to her, Elizabeth thought. She has never done anything wrong. You were supposed to believe that she was unaccountable. And believing, it was still

hell....

They went in to Tom. He had lain alone for the hour they had been gone. Martha got fresh water and helped him drink.

Kate removed her hat and placed herself stiffly in a chair. They glanced at each other. She was about to make a declaration. They puttered, waiting.

"I'm ready to go now," she said finally.

"Where?" Mark asked.

"To Kansae," she said briskly.

She was waiting for Papa to die, Elizabeth thought. She never would have gone as long as he was here alive. We've been waiting for her to die; she's been waiting for Papa to die. She'll outlive every one of us. She does nothing to wear her heart out.

Tom beckoned to Elizabeth. "What did Mamma say?" he whispered. He had seen the expressions on their faces.

"She says she's ready to go to Kansas." He showed neither relief nor disappointment.

On her way to the kitchen Elizabeth came upon Mark carrying out one of the boxes which they had packed three weeks earlier. He was panting under the weight of it.

"We're leaving at five o'clock in the morning," he said.

"Better get your sleep as early as you can."

"Sleep!" she said. "If we're leaving at five in the

morning you aren't going to sleep." She picked up a box and followed Mark. To wear yourself out, to keep the mind closed.... She had seen Papa dead. On top of the collection of articles which she was carrying sat one of Matt's snub-nosed work shoes, twisted and warped. They shouldn't carry such as that with them. But still...that might be all they had left of him. She pushed the shoe out of sight beneath the pile....

* * *

George got out of the car slowly and allowed the others to precede him into the house. He couldn't rush in ahead of them and apologize to Elizabeth. He had bungled it. They were only staying overnight; yet it would be a blow. James had come, too.

Kate was too weak to go to Elizabeth. Would someone inform her of her daughter's condition?

The man, woman, and child trooped into the dingy bedroom. After a few minutes George looked in.

Sunlight glared through the uncurtained window. Marie was occupying the one chair. Elizabeth's skin still had the greenish cast. George felt James studying him. "How are you?" he asked from the doorway.

"Better."

If James had been expecting to hear familiarity that must have disappointed him.

Suddenly James approached George holding out a handkerchief. "Your name is Halloway?"

"Yes?"

"Then this is yours." His eyes glittered with holy condemnation. His voice and his entire being vibrated with the satisfaction of divine retribution.

"Possibly so." George took the handkerchief without looking for identification. A doctor could lose a handkerchief in his patient's room...

He moved to the side of the bed. "Do you think you have a temperature?" Elizabeth understood the drama of the handkerchief. She glanced at him and then looked away and closed her eyes.

"I'll stop tomorrow to check on you," he said.

"It probably won't be necessary," she murmured.

"Sometimes unexpected complications..."

"We'll get a doctor," James said. Elizabeth stirred restlessly.

"Take it easy for a few days," George said. Without looking at any of them he left the room.

"I'll tell Mother you're feeling better," Marie said.

"Yes," Elizabeth said, "tell her." She was unable to decide what serious complications could result from James's attitude because of the fears which moved into her mind and closed doors behind them.

Marie teetered through the doorway on epindly heels. Jimmy followed. If Jimmy had stayod perhape she could have been spared whatever James was preparing to tell her. But it would have to be said. Get it over with.

Ignoring James, she lay a few minutes with her face to the wall. Her grose indifference would be making him furious and might stir up considerable spite. She was refusing to recognize the one threat that lay coiled with unblinking eyes at the back of her conciousness.

"Elizabeth..." James said.

"Yes?" She turned halfway toward him. Suddenly she realized that he did think she was having an affair with George. ..that the handkerchief had been lost during the night. She faced him equarely.

"...if you've got no decency, you could apare your own mother anyway. What do you think sho'll do when I tell her what you've been doin'?"

"I don't know," she said slowly. "What do you think? It's an interesting question to oontemplate." She had spoken as if she were objectively curious.

"If you think I'm going to let you keep Mamma here as a blind while you carry on your immoral buesinese, you have another think coming."

"If I'm the chiof of sinners perhape there ie hope for me," Elizabeth said. "Petty sinners seem never to reach the ranks of the sainte." There was a devil inside driving her on.

"One must kill, like Saint Paul or Moses or David...ah, David, who sent the husband to be killed in battle so that he could have the beautiful wife whom he had watched bathing. Lecherous fellow, wasn't he?"

James flushed with anger. "Does the Bible say that he was saved?"

"If he repented...that would be between him and the Lord, wouldn't it? ...Or one must be stouthearted, like Thomas or Peter, and deny God himself...."

"What about Mamma?" James interrupted.

"She will pray for me," Elizabeth said. "No one can pray like Mamma."

* * * * *

V

Kate held the orange close to her face, examining it minutely.

"Is there something the matter with the orange?" Elizabeth asked. "Do you think I've poisoned it?"

Kate scowled without answering.

"Do you want another orange? I'll bring the basket and let you choose one."

Kate held out the orange to Elizabeth. "Here, you eat it."

Elizabeth sat down beside the bed and began to peel it. Kate had refused the juice some weeks earlier and asked that the fruit be brought to her whole. Elizabeth had known then what was coming. It had happened a number of times before when other persons had been providing Kate's food.

"Now, do you want me to sit here until I digest the orange?" This wasn't going to do any good. Kate had lost interest already, but she was not admitting she had been mistaken. You could prove a dozen times over that there could not possibly be poison in the food; it would be futile. At this stage, a change of environment had been managed before; this time, it was out of the question.

Sign another paper? The oaths hadn't yet been violated. Papa was the one who had had her committed to the asylums. He had never signed. But now Papa was dead, and all the rest, at one time or another, had sworn never to have any part in committing her. Papers, papers--she must have a stack of them

looked in her black tin box. There were letters, too, which she claimed contained threats to her life. She had never named the authors of the threatening letters, but it was understood that Eunice was one of the guilty.

Kate had drawn beneath the covers so that only the tip of her cap was visible. She would be dormant for three or four hours, and then she would complain of a gnawing stomach. Weeping would follow and would last perhaps all night, with embellishments of alternate belching and praying.

Twenty-two days to go. She dared not cross the days off the calendar. Twenty-two. There had been crises...this was just such a crisis as the one which had necessitated a conference at Martia's house a year ago.

Mark's wife, Janet, looked chic, as always. The blue-plum divan was a foil for her flawless skin, sleek blonde hair. She had taken a fancy to simple clothes, mostly black, since the most observing relatives had become aware of Mark's success. And such self-confidence! Elizabeth had felt envy rise up like gorge in her throat. There was with it hatred--for a person she admired. It was a frightful feeling and she turned away, fearing Janet might see and understand. Janet had no doubt concerning her own superiority and her place in the scheme of things. Elizabeth felt superior only in a wretched, hateful sort of way. It was the denying, the negation that made you hate yourself along with the others.

"Mark is too sensitive," Janet said. "When something has to

be done, why not do it and forget about it?" She said this confidentially to Elizabeth.

"It isn't that easy," Elizabeth said. "Your own mother... do you think you could...?"

"If she were in that condition..."

"But actually you don't think she could be in such a condition."

"No, I don't."

"And Mark thinks it's a disgrace."

Janet shrugged. "It can't be helped."

"I refuse to be disgraced by it."

"If you knew all the things she's done while she has been with us...", Janet said.

"Makes no difference to me what she's done. I can't love her--in fact, I hate her at times, but I pity her and I can't see her suffer. Even without seeing her, I can't bear to think of her being mistreated."

"That's silly," Janet said. "She always thinks she's being mistreated; you know that."

"Yes, but leaving her to people who you feel sure care not at all what happens to her..."

"There are millions of people in the world who are badly treated."

"Of course. Is that a consolation to you when you know your own mother is miserable?"

"No, but my mother is not like yours. Kate enjoys misery."

"Possibly so."

Elizabeth had joined Martia in the kitchen, the beautiful, clean kitchen. That was what a proper husband did for you-- gave you a plant in which to manipulate flesh, vegetables, textiles... He gave you enclosed air and sunlight, water that ran, and madness risen from hell.

Miss Martha Ann McKenna, daughter of Mrs. Kate McKenna, and Matthew McKenna, deceased--after forty years of torture, became the bride of Mont E. Nearing last Sunday in the First Baptist Church. Mr. Nearing is the son of Mr. and Mrs. Arnold Nearing, narrowminded like the bride's mother; unlike the bride's mother in respectability, of 211 Tyler Street, Kansas City, Missouri.

The double ring ceremony was performed by the Rev. Roy C. McDowell, who leads his cow down Main Street every morning and evening, and who howled to high heaven about the sinfulness of smoking, until his backhouse caught fire and the volunteer fire department arrived pulling like a ricksha the two-wheeled hose cart and happened to hear the Reverend speaking unbecomingly to his fat old mother, who was holding behind her the cob pipe which had dropped a spark unnoticed among the ruffled leaves of the Sears Roebuck catalog, in a setting of lilies, sweet peas, roses, ferns, and baby breath.

Miss Elizabeth McKenna, sister of the bride, who reluctantly agreed to attend, refused to do anything as silly as lighting candles and contomplated throughout the ceremony the terrifying potentialities of being found in spiritual and physical slavery to another human creature, whose development could not be predicted, for better or worse... words, promises could not bind; only love would suffice...and declaring your love publicly was whispering in the dark, was protesting too much, was making up publicly for quarrelling privately.

The bride was given in marriage by her brother, Mark McKenna, rather than by her older brother Tom, (the oldest brother was too far away to attend) in spite of savoir-faire, Mark having overcome somewhat the sensitiveness which at thirteen had caused him to demand that Tom go into the grocery store to

make purchases...Tom had not improved in awareness
sufficiently to preclude the necessity of having
Mark count the change.

The best man was Robert L. Thiessen of Kansas City, Missouri, with whom the sister of the bride had attended a moving picture once, and after intensive consideration (a matter of days), had come to the conclusion that the said Mr. Thiessen had taken the principle of the conservation of matter too seriously, and that, if he expected to get back the price of admission, he should have squeezed the ticket girl.

The bride's mother wore a dress of faded cotton print, being detained at the time of the wedding in an institution commonly called insane asylum or big-house by those who have no acquaintances within the precincts of such an institution.

The knife with which the bride and groom cut the first piece of cake--the gleaming point of which the sister of the bride, subject to a certain compulsion concerning a sharp knife, felt enter the non-resisting mass which was her own yielding flesh at the apex where the ribs join--was decorated with rose-buds and ribbons.

Then air and sunlight enclosed and madness from hell...

Gleaming tableware in parallel rows. Forever yours, love-light, adorable. Charge at Nicholaen's. Birthday, anniversary, Christmas, Easter, Fourth of July--John gave me sterling. Forever yours, lovelight...this is my pattern. Turn the magazine pages...Capehart-Mercury-Bulova-Wodgwood. Forever yours.

"What's going to be done with Nanna?" Elizabeth wanted to sound them out individually.

"I don't know," Martie said. "She's accused Janet of putting poison in her food."

"I hadn't heard that. She had a spell of that at Tom's didn't she?"

"That's why she moved to Mark's."

"That's right," Elizabeth said. "I had forgotten. Looks as if it's my turn to do something," she ventured.

"What could you do while you're in college?"

"I could quit college. I don't like it anyway."

Martie was openly pleased. "We all wondered why you kept on."

We all wondered... Elizabeth felt resentment. They had talked about it. They had no right. Very poor taste. None of their business. College was escape from this sort of thing--competition in metals, hides, machines... She was abnormal because she didn't want to play the game. Her anger subsided quickly. What differences?

"I'm bored to death now--taking unbesurable courses in education. We're supposed to read little pamphlets filled with statistics to find out how many schools of different kinds there are in the state. And, you know, I don't give a damn how many there are."

From where she stood in the kitchen, Elizabeth watched the men coming in the front door after a full morning's discussion of automobiles, Mark in his tailor-made suit, infinitesimal moustache groomed to perfection. Tom was less trim, worried looking; Kent Nearing suave, but still hurried.

It seemed strange at the table without children. With children present, discussions would have been restricted. Without them

there was embarrassing formality. The McKennas were civilized now. Who would ever have thought it possible? As children they had come to the table in ragged overalls, having run the hands hastily through an inch of cold water in the tin basin and having wiped the dirt on the towel. They had teased and squabbled as long as Paps's preoccupation continued. Suddenly he would notice and tell them to quiet down. Never a muttered word after that. Mamma would come to the table, begin crying about something and leave again, having eaten little or nothing.

"Mamma," Elizabeth said to the tip of the stocking cap, "you're going to get miserably hungry. Is there anything I can bring you?"

No answer.

"I'll take you to the fruit market in the car, if you like, and we can ask the man to bring the fruit to you."

No answer.

"Or...I'll ask God to strike me dead and send me to Hell to burn through eternity...I'll swear by the Bible, or anything else, that I have never put poison in your food and never will."

"I'm exhausted," Kate sighed. "All I want is sleep."

Escape from responsibility, reality. There is no problem. There is no desire. Elizabeth understood too well the impulse and the reaction.

* * *

As Elizabeth stepped into the shed, she looked around for something to carry out, to give the appearance of business other than telephoning--a tool, perhaps...no, that wouldn't do it at all. In Kate's present state of mind a hammer, or almost anything sharp or heavy, would appear to be a weapon.

She rang the operator. She must get out quickly in case Kate had been watching and should come to investigate...or in case she should try to get away...

The nurse answered and connected her with George immediately. He had given directions.

"I have a patient. Can you call back in ten minutes?"

She hesitated.

"Is it an emergency? I'll come if..."

"Not, not now." She was shaking and her voice was betraying her. "Tonight. Could you leave your car a quarter mile or so up the road? I know this is terrible to ask you..."

"Never mind about that!" He was both reassuring and commanding.

"In the shed about midnight?" she asked apologetically. "Of course, something may go haywire and I won't be able to talk to you..."

"Could you tell me now?"

"I need food," she said hurriedly, "and something for my nerves...she may be coming now; I'll have to cut this short." She hung up the receiver and looked about the shed for something to take out. Rope...shovel...jug? Bucket. That shouldn't

appear threatening.

Kate wasn't in sight. Was she on the opposite side of the shed listening? You had to be sly and suspicious to keep up with her. It was a strain and it was disquieting.

If she went to the house without looking around the premises Kate might get into the grove and make herself difficult to find. One time she had gone to the Ivereon's trailerhouse. She was probably sensing strain, in spite of Elizabeth's effort to cover up.

Elizabeth turned and looked upward as if she were observing a bird or plane, then casually dropped her eyes, sweeping the areas around the shed and grove. Still there was the far side of the shed. She moved on toward the house, turning again to scan the sky and surrounding territory. Then stepping inside quickly, she went directly to Kate's room and repped softly on the door. No answer. She turned the knob. The door was unlocked; the bed was empty. Everything inside of Elizabeth contracted. Where?

She went to the living room window, feeling that she would be unable to see Kate standing directly in front of her. There was no one on the road. She had turned away from the window with the purpose of investigating the grove--and then she turned back. There was a small dark object which had registered belatedly in her brain. It was almost out of sight, only a short distance this side of the market. How could Kate cover that distance in

such a short time?

And if it were someone else...Kate would get farther away while Elizabeth was following the wrong trail. She had considered what she would do in this event, but now she could think only of the car---a means of making haste.

After two attempts she got the car started, kept second gear to make the turn. In high, she pressed the accelerator to the floorboard. Seconds might make the difference.

Halfway to the market, she slowed to fifteen miles an hour to avoid attracting attention. There was no one on the road. As she drew nearer to the market she saw Kate among the buyers. Did she have money? Even if she did, it was likely she would make a scene. She had been given money by various members of the family to buy new glasses, to have her teeth repaired... She never used the money for those purposes; she gave it to preachers--mostly to radio preachers.

Elizabeth got out of the car quietly and walked casually toward Kate.

"Do you need some money, Mamma?" she asked softly, bringing from her slacks pocket a one-dollar bill. Kate took the bill without appearing to know what she was doing and presently tears were running down her face.

"Are you tired?" Elizabeth asked. "If you'll say what you want, I'll get it for you." Kate dabbed at her eyes.

The proprietor was coming their way. "If you would like to sit in the car...I'll buy what you want." Kate turned toward

the road. Elizebeth said over her shoulder to the dealer, "I'll be back in a minute." His look was full of curiosity with a tinge of suspicion.

Kate wanted bananas and lemons, and when they reached home, she would have some raw eggs. She lay down in the back seat.

Elizebeth sighed. Another crisis afoot. Five more days.

With five pounds of bananas and a bag of lemons piled near Kate, who had lost interest in the whole procedure--and possibly in her current fear of being poisoned, they drove home.

Let her eat raw eggs. Kate knew more than experts. If she developed gag on the stomach, the gag would be the result of worry or constitutional weaknesses, not of indigestible albumen.

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Elizebeth crept out of the back door to the shed. George was waiting. The white triangle of his shirt shone in the darkness.

"I've brought food and sedative," he said. "How many more days?"

"Five."

"She won't go with you in the car to a grocery store?"

"I wouldn't take her...I couldn't watch her. She got away from me today..."

"My God," George said. "Five days..." He put his arms around her and stroked her head. "How do you feel?"

Elizebeth began to cry. That was what sympathy did...en-

couraged self-pity...the way flight increased fear. The hand that stroked her head served to lose infinite loneliness and hopelessness which overwhelmed her for a time.

"I never could bear up under sympathy," she said finally.

"You're thin," George said. "As soon as this is over..."

"Don't say it. Who knows how it will end--or whether it will end? I don't think I'm superstitious, George, but I'm... well, I suppose...it's nothing but pessimism. With Kate, it's been like war. We've said over and over again, half hoping, 'Maybe this time...' But nothing has worked. It's been twenty years."

"I'll do anything to help..."

"George," Elizabeth interrupted, "I won't be able to testify. I'd let her kill me first."

"I'll see that you don't have to testify."

"You can do that?"

"I can do it."

"You won't slip, so they'll know what I've been doing...?"

"If I told them..." George chuckled, "they'd lock me up. They wouldn't believe me. It would be like James Thurber's 'Unicorn in the Garden'."

Elizabeth laughed shakily. "James Thurber should be president. I'd vote for him..."

"Besides, you aren't doing anything illegal."

"There's many an immoral act that's legal..."

"Aren't you afraid Kate will start out somewhere now?"

George broke in.

"No, thank God. She's afraid of the dark. I can rest at night; otherwise..."

"Could we find a couple of boxes to sit on?" George asked.

"I don't want to keep you...you need sleep."

"Sleep can wait. Remember what kind of a doctor I am? Well, I'm not going to be that kind much longer."

"What do you mean?"

"If we can sit down, I'll tell you."

"I'd better go listen for ~~Mamma~~. If she's stirring, looking for me, I can say I have dysentery."

"Diarrhea," George corrected.

"She likes dysentery better. I'll bring a box; there's one in here--if you can find it."

In the kitchen she held her breath listening, then moved to the hallway, from which point she could hear Kate snoring. She took a box from the back porch and stopped cautiously on the old steps.

"Now," she said, as she seated herself in the shed, "what is this mysterious move you're about to make?"

"I'm going to England."

"Oh. Surprise."

"Been thinking about it for some time...have a friend over there who was in medical school with me. I'd have gone last fall if...if I hadn't wanted to see how your case was going to turn out."

"You meen," she said, "you felt responsible."

"I suppose so. What I wanted to say...I have something for you--a project. You don't want to talk about it..."

Elizabeth equirmed. "Now you're appealing to my inexorable curiosity. I'll have to know."

"That curiosity is going to take care of you," George said.

She could hear him grinning as he talked and she knew when the grin was gone.

"And the war is going to take care of me," he added.

"You'll be blown up," she said. "Are you being noble?"

"No, I'm not being noble. I want to get back to brain surgery...plenty of cases in Britain and it isn't going to end there."

"I'm afraid not."

"It's done terrible things in Britain...that's where you come in."

"Oh?"

"British children are being sent to this country..."

"Yes..." She held her breath.

"If you want it..."

"Yes." She was surprised at her feeling. One needed to want things...to look forward. "George," (she was calling on God, too) "don't let anything happen. Perhaps it's being selfish..."

"Stop talking nonsense."

"What is selfishness? If you help someone--say in my case--taking care of Mamma because I can't bear seeing, or thinking

about, her suffering...that could be interpreted as selfishness. I may be insisting on something that's dangerous for other people... The term selfishness, like tolerance, must give way to a more meaningful one. The welfare of the greatest number doesn't satisfy..."

"You're making life too difficult, Liz."

"Send me the children. Keep me busy." She got up. "I'd better go in." He got up and put his arm around her again.

"You've been good for me, Liz."

"I don't see how." Her voice was troubled.

George laughed. "Don't try to analyze it...frank conversations, mostly."

She patted his shoulder. "Everything's going to be better."

"Yep."

She moved toward the open doorway. "George..." She turned around. "Who will support these children? I can't work if I..."

"I'll support them," he said. "We'll say they are the children I never had. And you can donate the affection and care."

"...as if they be the children I shall never have."

"All's well, then." She stepped out into the moonlight.

"Call me any time of the day or night."

"Thanks." She walked swiftly toward the house. Almost out of sight up the road toward the market was the black hulk which was George's car.

This time she removed her shoes and tested the floor at each step before shifting her weight forward. She paused at

the door listening to Kate's snoring.

Kate hadn't been wakeful. For some reason she had refused the eggs after reaching home. Possibly thought Elizabeth had injected poison into them. If so, then the problem of poison was still to be dealt with. Five days.

* * *

"Would you like some breakfast, Mamma?" After Elizabeth had listened at the door for a moment fear began to grip her. Could Kate be dead? What would they do to her if Kate died? They'd say she'd starved her own mother. And there were no witnesses--except George, and he must not become implicated. To lose everything after a year...! "Mamma!" The panic she heard in her voice increased her fright. A rustle...? Yes, Kate was moving. Thank God, thank God!

She hadn't considered the possibility of Kate's dying before the end of the year--they had been disappointed so many times. But, of course, she would outlast them all. Elizabeth took a deep breath, feeling that she had known all the time that Kate was not dead.

"Would you like some hot cereal this morning, Mamma?"

"No," Kate answered weakly. "No, thanks." She was delighting in her state--helpless against her enemies, with the Lord protecting her. Her belief, or pretended belief, that she was being persecuted satisfied her desire for attention. Throughout childhood, and even for a time after marriage, the need had been satisfied by compliments, flattery from Kate's mother.

No one has ever looked so beautiful in a white hat as you, Kate.

Elizabeth went back to the kitchen. She had run out of reading matter the evening before--there wasn't even a newspaper for exercising her critical faculties.

Breakfast. She thought over the possibilities; cereal... eggs...? She had been watching her diet to see that she ate enough vegetables and had been avoiding certain abuses of earlier years, such as slighting breakfast and eating between meals. But preparing meals for herself alone had lost importance and eating alone had become increasingly difficult.

The year had been tedious. No flights, no excesses. And now, at the end, no elation.

Should she call George? After brief consideration, she decided to wait. There was no hurry. The year was safely past. Even more--a year and two days. If Kate hadn't been starving herself, the time might have been stretched a few more days.

Elizabeth poured her second cup of coffee from the aluminum percolator. She could hear Kate stirring like a beetle among dry leaves. She would be coming out presently to go to the toilet. The radio... Kate couldn't miss morning devotions... count your many blessings. Elizabeth hadn't tuned a radio during the entire year... she had come to dislike everything concerned with radio. At Martie's she had lost her temper at the commercial advertising, and Martie had said she paid too much attention to such things. Martie was right, of course. There had been only one answer--

forego radio.

At times she worried about her tendency to give up, her failure to adapt. She was afraid that some morning, when... if there were no one around to depend on her, or to know what she did, she might throw back the covers, get out of bed, walk out to the back porch in her pajamas to look and listen. The sense of freedom would be so great that she wouldn't be able to feel importance in dressing and preparing food; she would spread a slice of bread with peanut butter and wash it down with water, even though she was inordinately fond of coffee. Then, without washing or combing, she would open her book to read. (George was right, but would she ever give up the books?) That would be the beginning of the end.

She couldn't stay here one day after Kate was gone. This climate wasn't good for her...too mild, too agreeable. She needed a challenge, a problem... She had to have change, change...like Kate. Knowing that, she must be careful not to be caught in a trap. Traps lay hidden everywhere. Falling in love... What a horrible trap to love a man and marry him and have his children... to live in one house for years, to make the unimportant decisions from day to day which, after all, would have to be made to keep alive. And then--to know you would lose all of them--to whom you had lost your soul... She had been caught in a web all her life... if she broke loose from it, she must never let herself be caught in another.

Kate was coming out now. A telephone call to George would

start the machinery moving.

Kate shuffled through the kitchen with downcast look. Elizabeth watched her slow progress across the yard. Her body was only a frame of bones now; she was unable to hold herself erect.

* * *

George felt foolish shaking hands with the nurse. It was one of the meaningless conventions. He told her to take good care of herself and the new doctor. She looked as if she were going to cry, and that made him very uncomfortable. She thought he was being brave and patriotic and not telling what else. She didn't know that the hardest thing for him to do would be to sit out this war in his office. If he should tell her that, she would say, or think, that his noble spirit longed to be in the thick of the battle--or something like that.

As he went out into the grey mist he glanced at his watch. Ten o'clock. Elizabeth should be calling soon now. There was no use waiting. Kate would be so weak by this time she wouldn't be able to put up a fight. Of course, it was hard to tell which would be worse for Elizabeth--to see Kate carried away fighting or to see her go submissively. He remembered that his father had told him and his mother at the dinner table that other time how surprisingly quiet Kate had been when it was time to go.

He asked at the hotel desk if there had been a call for him during the past ten minutes. The nurse was to call him if she

heard from Elizabeth. He had promised to stay with Kate until all arrangements were completed.

As soon as he reached his room, he began to worry. When he explained to Elizabeth that Kate really believed herself to be in danger of being poisoned and would feel justified in any defensive measure--which might become offensive--Elizabeth had said she knew Kate too well to be afraid of her. It would have been useless to try to convince...ten years ago she had been stubborn; now she was fatalistic.

George found himself too restless to sit still. He decided to proceed. Elizabeth had made him promise not to call her. He called the hospital to say he was ready for the ambulance, which he had arranged for earlier. Then he called the nurse to say that he was on his way to the ranch...

* * *

Elizabeth poured her third cup of coffee and watched Charlie working in the grove. It was beginning to rain a velvet mist as Kate moved at snail's pace back toward the house. Her hunched figure looked like a witch from a fairy tale. How could she walk at all, having had nothing but milk and fruit juice--and not always milk, for over a month?

It was time now. She must speak, so that Kate would not be frightened any more than necessary. Kate had reached the porch now. What was it that must be said...? Why had she, Elizabeth, been left responsible for this last act? She of all those who had signed the papers, was to break her word.

No one else would be blamed. She had chosen, but why? Because there had been no other way; this was her destiny...Judas. She watched silently as Kate went through the kitchen and into the hall, cold anger falling away into devastating melancholy. What was the use of planning and carrying out plans? Behind every success and pleasure were pits and traps and nets to ensnare. The year was done, the battle won--poetic, but no joy, no triumph. You had merely deceived and betrayed, and who could know whether it was for better or worse?

Kate would be better off dead. Why didn't she kill Kate and then herself? Pulling the trigger, the thrust of a knife (her compulsion concerning knives seemed to have no practical application), even turning on gas would be out of the question.

There was sound of a car on the road. George? No, it was changing gears. The mail carrier. She hadn't taken the trouble to go to the mail box the day before. She went out into the mist, enjoying it on her face.

There hadn't been a good letter the whole year. Letters had to be written for Mamma's consumption--pious and cheerful. Cheerfulness was a good trait, but a mixture of artificial piety and Pollyanna gladness was a nasty dose. She had written about Kate's current poison complex, and all she had heard in return was: "...glad Mamma is happy in the Lord." Well, that's what she had told them to write. All letters had to be handed over to Mamma. They had taken no chances on getting one through secretly. Kate had waited for the carrier at the box a couple of times and

Elizabeth hadn't been able to relax until she saw there was no mail. It was surprising that Kate hadn't accused Elizabeth or the carrier of holding back letters. That was part of her repertoire.

Elizabeth reached into the box. A letter...from Marie. It might have been there overnight. Marie was the one person you couldn't depend on. She had written all that stuff about James-- eyes going to the bad, numbness in his legs.

In the kitchen, she opened the letter. As she read, the words began to waver and blot out. She should have known...should have known...that this was the sort of assignment which was being brewed up for her. "He says I must have given it to him when we was first married. He never told me about it then. It don't do him any good to talk like that... Now listen Elizabeth I'm leaving this town. What happens to him don't make any dif to me. He hasn't got long to live and he better start praying..."

Elizabeth looked out the window, numbly watching Charlie move about on business of importance. When he went out of sight, she stared for a time at the kitchen wall and finally laid her head on her arms.

* * *

Someone was talking, calling her name. George. He had come.

"How is Kate?"

How is she? How could she be?

"Elizabeth..."

She moved her head on her arms, but could not lift it. Her entire body was numb...heavy...lead.

George went out to speak to the driver and the interne, who were sitting in the ambulance. In a few minutes he returned, and with a glance at Elizabeth, went through the kitchen to her bedroom. He worked swiftly packing her few belongings into a suitcase. Then he went to the only door that was closed--Kate's room.

He hesitated, wondering if he should knock. After deciding to open the door gently, he found it locked. This was likely to be complicated. He knocked lightly. There was a weak answer.

"Your daughter is ill, must be taken to the hospital," he said.

There was silence...and then the creak of bed and scuffling of slippers. The key turned. Kate peered at him.

"Elizabeth isn't well?"

"Quite ill... She must get to a hospital as soon as possible." Take Kate's mind off herself by emphasizing Elizabeth's difficulty. "She would like to have you go with her..." This was scarcely what he had planned. "I brought an ambulance..."

"I'm a burden to my family," Kate said. She began to weep.

"I'll see to it that you get the best possible care."

"You're Doctor Halloway's son, aren't you?" she said unexpectedly.

"Yes."

"He was good to me..." She moved weakly to the bed.

"He was good to everyone."

"I'll go," she said. "I haven't long to live." She sighed deeply.

She knows what's happening, George thought. He helped her to the bed and began gathering her clothes. He found a locked suitcase in the closet. She pulled up a corner of the mattress to get the key. When he opened the bag she asked for the letters which were in it. There was a large bundle with the one on top marked "important."

Clutching the letters, she lay back and closed her eyes. When he had finished packing, he opened the window screen to signal to the driver and went to the kitchen to meet them. Elizabeth was in the same position, her head on her arms.

He led the two men to Kate's room. When they lifted her to the stretcher she said she was cold. They covered her with the patchwork comforters from the bed.

George followed them out carrying the two suitcases and Elizabeth's suit. As he passed the water color of the clam diggers, he took it from the wall. Patrick lay under the table against Elizabeth's feet, moving only his eyes to watch the procession move through the kitchen.

Returning, George spoke to Elizabeth and shook her. Then he lifted her head and saw the letter in her hand and removed it. When he saw the postmark, he suspected that the contents had a great deal to do with Elizabeth's state.

"The doctor eaye he'e got perises. If you don't know what thet means its siffelea..." Thet was the trouble he had been having with hia lege. "Nobody cen expect me to etay with him-- e person thats got aiffales..."

"Elizebeth," George said, "it isn't your duty to look after Jemee." He sat down beside her and apoke elowly, without emotion. "Paretice auffer little as institutional patients. He'll soon be having delueions of grandeur if he haen't already..."

She showed no eign of hearing. Stooping, he alipped his left erm under her kneea, pleced her left arm around hie neck and cerried her out of the houe, Petrick following.

From the orange grove, Cherlie Iveraon wetchod the car and ambulance move away through the mist.

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